

THE MYSTERY STORIES OF

J. S. FLETCHER

"Mr. Fletcher is a master of plot, and he never goes beyond the bounds of reason in its procedure and development. He, moreover, can write the English language as a vital means to the end both of narrative and description, and he never fails to show that he is its master. It is therefore a pleasure to read his stories, not merely for their entertaining qualities, but also for the agreeable appeal of their manner and their style."

Boston Evening Transcript.

Rippling Ruby

By

J. S. Fletcher

Author of "The Charing Cross Mystery," etc.



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G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York & London
The Knickerbocker Press

1923

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RIPPLING RUBY

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CHAPTER I

THE GENERAL DEALER

How it came about that on that particular Springtide morning I was stranded on the Clarence Pier at Portsmouth with, literally, a few pence in my pocket, is immaterial to the present purpose; the more pertinent fact is that there I was, in that miserable predicament, with none to turn to for immediate help, and utterly blank of mind as to what was next to be done. I had paid out two of my last coppers to obtain entrance to that pier—there was a vague notion that I might pick up some portorage job there which would bring in a shilling.

With a shilling I could send a telegram to the only man I knew who would be likely to wire me money—he was the last resource; for I had already pawned my watch and my overcoat, and, hourly expecting a remittance which up to then had not arrived, had not had the sense to make the application by letter which I was now feverishly anxious to make by

telegraph. There might be someone coming off a boat at that pier who would give a shilling to have a bag carried—I would undertake the job with fervour. But at the end of an hour I was still unemployed, and was thinking of trying the railway stations; then, very suddenly, the man came on the scene who plunged me headlong into action and adventure.

He was coming away from the window of the ticket office where you book for Ryde and Cowes and Southampton, this man, and he carried a ticket in his hand and was clearly unconscious that it was there. A big, heavily-built fellow in a dark-blue serge suit, topped by a rather sporting sort of overcoat, he looked to me like a well-to-do publican, or, perhaps, a bookmaker; there was that air about him. But just then, whatever he was, his great idea was certainly to do something or get somewhere in a tremendous hurry; his eyes, as he came out on the open pier, were all over the place at once, taking in the misty coast-line on the opposite side of the water, looking up the water itself as if in search of the Ryde boat, which even then was churning its way towards us, and then glancing first over one shoulder and next over the other as if he either expected or feared to encounter somebody.

In his haste, or his nervousness, he raised his fat, stub-ended fingers to his chin, and in so doing discovered that he was holding a ticket; I will swear that until that instant he had forgotten that he had

just taken it. But now he hastened to thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, and in so doing he encountered something else that he had evidently forgotten. His fingers came out of the pocket grasping a scrap of paper twisted up into what they call a cocked hat. And here I made certain that the man was in a state of terrible preoccupation, for after staring blankly at this discovery he made a sign of vexation and looked round him in a fashion which said as plainly as possible that he had omitted to do something which ought to be done at once. But my wits had been sharpened by privation during the last two days, and without more ado I stepped up to him.

“Can I take that somewhere for you, sir?” I said, pointing to the bit of paper, which he was twisting round and round in his fingers. “I think you want it delivered to somebody.”

He started—more nervously than one would have expected in such a big fleshy frame—and gave a sharp, suspicious, and yet, I fancied, highly relieved glance.

“Eh, what?” he exclaimed, running me over from top to toe. “You—wanting a job?” I knew what he meant. Outwardly, I was eminently respectable; good clothes, good footwear; I was even spotless in linen. But the boat was at hand, and I did not hesitate.

“I’d be glad of the chance of earning a few shillings,” I answered hurriedly. “Stranded—un-

expectedly—you understand. I'll carry your note for you—and you can trust me." He had evidently made up his mind to do that, for without another word he plunged a hand—there were two or three big, be-diamonded rings on its pudgy fingers—into his trousers pocket and pulled it out again full of gold. And picking out a sovereign with no more concern than if it had been a shilling, he thrust it into my hand with the bit of folded paper.

"Look you here, my lad," he said, confidentially. "There's a name on that paper—Holliment. That's the chap it's for—Holliment. You get into those streets between High Street and the Hard—you know? Ask for Holliment—general dealer—anybody'll tell you. And give him that. Go now—and there's a quid all to yourself. My boat!—you'll go straight off?"

"This instant!" said I. "He'll have it in a few minutes. Greatly obliged to you!"

"Bless you!" he answered, with a queer sort of grin. "Ditto!"

He made for the boat, and without a backward glance I hurried off that pier, lighter of heart than I had been for forty-eight hours. A sovereign!—for ten minutes' walk. I went away towards High Street feeling as if the Bank of England had suddenly become my sole property. Turning a corner, and chancing to look seaward I saw the smoke of the steamer rolling away in the sharp breeze—my man was there, scudding gaily across the water.

Whither?—and why in such a hurry!—in so much of a hurry, indeed, that he had forgotten to send the scrap of paper which was now in my pocket—a missive that was evidently of so much importance that he was glad to have it carried at any cost. Sharpened in perception as I was by hunger (for I had had no breakfast, and had gone very short the day before), I knew that the man was intensely relieved to get rid of that note and parted with his sovereign right willingly.

I began to get curious about this twisted, crumpled scrap of paper. Who was Holliment? What was this highly important message? What did the whole thing mean? Before I came to High Street, my inquisitiveness got the better of me; I pulled out the cocked hat and turned it over two or three times. I saw then that it was a piece of paper hurriedly torn out of a cheap account-book—a poor quality paper, the first stuff that had lain to hand. And I felt no great compunction, things being as they were, in unwrapping it and looking at whatever might be written inside—there was already a spice of mystery about this adventure, and wherever there is mystery there is danger; I wanted to know what I was in for, in some degree.

Standing for a second in the open street, I read all that was written. Two words, heavily underscored:—

CLEAN AWAY

There was nothing else. No name; no address; nothing. I was as wise as ever. So folding the torn leaf into its original lines, I slipped it into my pocket again, and crossing the High Street, plunged into the slums which lie between it and the Hard.

There are some queer places in Portsmouth, and it seemed to me that Holliment, whoever he was, lived in one of the queerest. It was quite evident, however, that he was known pretty well, and after various turnings to right and turnings to left, I saw his name in dirty white letters on a black sign which formed one of the chief landmarks in a peculiarly squalid street. The sign was displayed above the windows of a low-roofed, one-storied place, half shop, half shed; this was flanked by a much higher, tower-like erection which I took to be an old sail-loft; the name was on that, too, in smaller letters on a smaller signboard.

In the wall of the lower building was a double door, wide open to the street, and when I walked inside it I saw at once that Holliment's business of general dealer was a wide and various one, for I never set eyes on such a collection of ancient stuff as that which he had gathered about him; the place was a scrap-heap, a dumping ground of all sorts of rubbish, from once gaily-coloured figure-heads to rusty nails.

The only thing that looked at all modern was a freshly-painted placard hung on the window of a

sort of office; it announced that orders for coal were taken there, and gave a list of current prices. But just then there was no one in this office, nor in the gloom of the shed-like, much-cumbered place, and I had waited and rapped for some minutes before a man came out of the shadows and approached me—a short, fattish, furtive-eyed man, in his shirt-sleeves, who obviously wondered what I was after.

I pulled out the note.

“Mr. Holliment?” I asked.

“That’s me, sir,” replied the man.

“A gentleman whom I met on the Clarence Pier, who was in a hurry to catch the boat, asked me to give this to you,” I continued. “I came straight to you with it; he seemed anxious that you should have it at once.”

I placed the note in his very dirty hands and stood by watching him narrowly as he somewhat clumsily opened it. I should say that he was ordinarily a man who could keep a compressed countenance, concealing his feelings very well, but on this occasion he was obviously taken too sharply to hide anything. His puffy face turned the colour of a dead thing—it made me think for the instant of those calves’-heads that lie on the butchers’ stalls—and when a shade of life came back to it, it was a grey dull shade. His hands shook suddenly, and he only half-checked an exclamation. And at that I affected to see nothing, turning away. But suddenly I felt that he was regarding me.

"Do you know him who gave you this?" he asked quickly.

"Not at all," said I. "Stranger to me—and I to him. The fact is, I was looking for a job, and I saw he wanted that taken somewhere, so I offered to take it."

"He give you anything?" he inquired, looking me over, pretty much as the other man had done.

"If you want to know," I answered, "he did! He gave me a sovereign."

No surprise came into his face. Instead, he suddenly made a movement towards his coat, which hung on a nail close by. He began shuffling into it.

"Look here!" he said. "I've got to go out—business! Over that!" He pointed to the scrap of paper, which he had crumpled up and flung away on the floor. "Some hours I've got to be out—can't help it. You say you were looking for a job? Stop here and give an eye to things till I come back—to-night it'll be. I'll give you another quid—and there's nothing to do."

"What is there to do?" I asked. "Can I do it?"

"There's nothing to do—but stick here," he responded quickly. "Keeping an eye on things. If anybody comes for any of this old stuff, let 'em have what they want and take their names and what they've got. If anybody orders coal, write it down in that book. I'll be back about six or seven, and you shall have your money."

I hesitated a bare second—after all, the extra

sovereign was worth a few hours of that sort of thing.

"All right," I said. "I'll stop till you come back. But, there's one thing."

"Well?" said he, edging away towards the door in his obvious impatience. "What?"

"Dinner!" said I. "I shall want it."

"That's all right," he replied. "A man brings mine at one, sharp—take that. You'll find it'll do you. Well, then, till this evening."

"I'll see to things," I assured him.

He made for the door without another word—but before he went through it and into the street, he looked cautiously round the door-posts, up and down; there was that in his action which assured me that he was keenly anxious. Then he shot off, and I, too, looked out, to see whither he went. It was not raining, but he slunk rapidly along the side of the wall, close to it, as if rain had been coming down cats-and-dogs, and with his head bent, his slouch hat pulled over his eyes, and his whole attitude that of a man who is running away.

Suddenly he shot into one of those narrow alleys of which there are so many thereabouts, and so I saw him no longer. But I had seen enough to convince me that if the sender of the mysterious message was in a state of high nervousness, its recipient was in another of something very like fright, and I wondered why.

What had happened that morning in the affairs of

these two men to make both hasten off somewhere in desperately hurried fashion? Something, evidently—but all the speculation in the world would not tell me what. Meanwhile there I was, in charge of an ancient rubbish store, the afternoon to get over, and another sovereign to anticipate. That, anyway, odd as the adventure seemed, was preferable to hanging about Portsmouth wondering what I was to do when my first sovereign was spent.

It was now past noon, and between then and one o'clock nothing whatever happened. I sat down in the little office and read the newspaper. No customers came; nobody came. But at precisely one o'clock in walked an individual who was obviously the potman of some adjacent hostelry. He carried a tray, whereon, beneath a cloth, were sundry dishes, covered with tin plates, a half-loaf of crusty bread, and a jug of foaming ale. A good smell came from his tray, and I silently blessed it and him. He stared at me in surprise, and I hastened to relieve his anxieties.

"Mr. Holliment's away for this afternoon," I said. "He's left me in charge, and I'm to have his dinner."

"That's all right," he answered, and set his tray on a neighbouring table, "and a good un it is, and here's wishing you a proper appetite."

"Same to you," I responded politely.

He grinned understandingly and went off, and I had the cloth and the tin cover whipped away before

the sound of his big feet had died out on the pavement. Clearly, I thought, Mr. Holliment had a very comfortable notion of a homely dinner! There was roast loin of pork, with apple sauce, potatoes, and greens; there was plum pie and custard; there was a mighty wedge of good cheese. And there was the ale—a whole jug of prime stuff, with a head on it.

I felt like a new man when I had made an end of Holliment's dinner. After all, the adventure was turning out well for me. I had not fared so sumptuously for many a day, and I had a sovereign in my pocket and another in prospect. I should be able to sleep in a decent lodging that night, and next day to journey onward to London by rail instead of tramping the highway. Everything, in fact, looked quite rosy just then, and, finding a box of very decent cigars on the office desk, I lighted one and prepared to face the business requirements of the afternoon with complacency and patience.

By the time I had finished that cigar I was beginning to think that for all practical purposes Holliment might just as well have locked up his place of business as have left me or anyone else in charge of it. It was then past two o'clock, and not a soul had crossed the threshold since Holliment stepped over it—always saving the welcome potman. I was beginning to get bored. And in order to amuse myself I took a cast round the place, examining it and its contents.

The low, shed-like erection and its piles of old

iron, coils of ropes, heaps of rubbish I took in at a glance; there was nothing much there to interest me. But the taller building at the side had more of interest. It turned out to be a high, gloom-filled place, not unlike the interior of a church tower, and just about as badly lighted. Whatever purpose it had served I could not make out; its floor was littered with more rubbish, or what seemed so to me, and its walls were thick with dust and great festoons of cobwebs. Around them, beginning in one corner and going in flights and landings across and around the others, was a narrow, rickety stair, which wound far away into the thick gloom at the extreme top. Why any stair should be there at all I could not make out; there were no doorways in the three or four landings, and no signs that there had once been floorings between the pavement on which I stood and the unceilinged roof so high above me.

But when, after some time, my sight had grown accustomed to the gloom, I made out that right away at the head of the stair, just beneath the head of the rough wall and the beginning of the tiles, there was a door, or at any rate an opening—a black, cavernous-looking place.

And I was wondering what lay behind it, and whence it might lead, when I heard somebody come into the shop, and, after beating on the floor, call loudly for its proprietor.

CHAPTER II

THE CHINAMAN

THIS was the first customer I had seen—a man who wanted some old iron, and had a small cart outside whereon to carry it away. He helped himself to what he wanted when I had explained matters to him, and remarking that his name was Toller, and that Mr. Holliment knew him well enough, carried out his stuff, and went away with it. This broke the ice—other folk began to drop in. They all seemed to know their way about, and were all ready to mention their names; what puzzled me about them was whatever they meant to do with the things they picked out and took away.

Nobody seemed at all surprised to find Holliment out; nobody paid any particular attention to me as his representative. I came to the conclusion that this was a queer sort of business. But during the afternoon I did some trade in coal; one man came in and ordered a truckload; another wanted four tons; before the dusk came on I had written down memoranda concerning coal delivery which represented a considerable amount of money. So the time passed, and at half-past four in walked the friendly potman,

armed with yet another tray. A capacious pot of tea this time, piping hot, flanked by another tin dish, wherein was a mountain of buttered toast. Once more I was convinced that Holliment knew how to make himself comfortable.

The potman carried away the dinner things; he informed me, while he put them together, that he came from the Admiral Hawke, round the corner, and asked if I was going to be where I was when to-morrow came, because, if so, there was going to be roast beef on tab, and he would see that I had a good helping. I told him that, as far as I was aware, Mr. Holliment would shortly be back and my temporary engagement over, but, I added, if I was still in Portsmouth at noon next day I would take care to visit the Admiral Hawke and dine there, if that was possible. He answered that it was quite possible: there was a half-crown ordinary there at one o'clock, whereat they did people far better than at any of the hotels where the nobs went.

He went off then with his jingling tray and tins, and I drank tea and ate hot buttered toast in great contentment. And just after that it began to grow first dusk and then dark, and through the open double-door of the shop I saw lights begin to shine out across the street, and through a vista between the opposite houses, where there was a glimpse of the harbour and of the Gosport shore in the distance, I caught the gleam of other lights, red and green and yellow, that came out on the spars of passing

ships. Why, I do not exactly know, but the sight of those lights somehow made me begin to wish that Holliment would return, give me the reward of my vigil, and let me go about my business.

There was a lamp on the rough desk in the bit of an office, and as soon as I had finished the tea and toast I lighted it—the darkness was getting a bit too marked. The draught from the door on the street caused the lamp to smoke. I went over to shut it. Just then a lad came along shouting the five o'clock edition of the newspaper; I bought a copy and went back to the office, and as I had no tobacco of my own I helped myself to another of Holliment's cigars, and sat down in a rickety elbow chair to read and smoke.

Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes went by in this fashion—and then, chancing to look over the top of the newspaper, and in the direction of the dirty window-panes which gave on the street, I saw, close-pressed against the glass, the flat nose and slant eyes of a yellow-checked Chinaman.

This unholy and discomfoting vision faded out of sight as suddenly as it had come into it—so suddenly, indeed, that for the instant I wondered if the whole thing was not hallucination. But on the next I was out of that office and at the door of the shop, staring at the place where the Chinaman ought to have been. He was not there; there was no one there—the street at that point was empty. I did not see even the whisk of a garment disappearing round the

corner of the narrow alley into which Holliment had slunk a few hours before. All I saw was the lights, feeble and obscure, along the squalid street, and the passing of other lights, green and red, across a bit of dark water.

I went back to the office and the friendliness of its lamp, conscious that my heart was beating at a faster rate than it should have done. I was frightened. It would have been odd if I had not been frightened—startled, at any rate. What was that parchment-faced Chink after? Why did he peep in there, through a corner of the window, instead of entering the shop? The mere sensation of being overlooked was unpleasant enough, but there had been that in the dark, slanting eyes which made me certain that their owner was spying. Why? Whom did he want? Holliment, of course. I wished heartily that Holliment would come. To be left there, in that gloomy hole of a place, with evil-faced Easterns looking in upon me, was what I had not bargained for. And, careless about possible customers, I presently went back to the street door and, after examining its fastenings, drew a big bolt into place. Holliment could knock when he came; until then, I was determined that no foot should cross the dirty threshold.

There was a blind above the window through which the Chinaman had looked, and when I went back to the office I took hold of its cord to draw it down. The whole thing came away in my hand, rotten with

age and disuse. But I was going to have no more faces at the window, and finding some tacks and a hammer, I got up on Holliment's desk and nailed the blind to the casement, shutting out the darkness and the spits of light in the opposite houses. That done, I attempted to read the paper again.

I had not read many lines when I heard a sound—gentle, but palpable—outside the door which I had just barred. At that, I stole across the floor and listened. All was still at first, but at last I heard movements outside—soft, cat's-foot movements. And then the handle of the door was turned, quietly, slowly; I saw the brass knob within moving. But whoever it was that had his hand on the outer knob soon realised that the place was now secured against him, and presently I heard the stealthy footsteps move off. The Chinaman again, without a doubt.

I was by that time fully disposed to go away, leaving this sort of thing to go on without me; I had had enough of it. But I did not like to go before handing over the place to its owner; also, I saw no way of locking the street door from the outside—if there was a key, Holliment evidently had it in his pocket. It would scarcely do to leave the place unprotected; moreover, I particularly wanted my sovereign. And, after all, the man had said that he would be back that evening, and it was already well past six o'clock.

I sat down again, and again tried to read. That was poor work; the minutes dragged. But, at last,

I heard seven striking from the neighbouring clocks, and almost immediately afterwards I heard something else—a sound of slow, stealthy movement in the tower-like building at the side of the shop. Even as I caught it, it ceased; a minute or two went by, I heard it again—again it ceased. That there were rats in that place I had no doubt, but something in that muffled sound made me certain that it came from a human being.

Rather than sit there, listening and wondering, I picked up the lamp and went into the place. The lamp was about as effective as a single match lighted in a cavern; it showed a small area at my feet, and kept the rest of the high space above me in darkness. Of course, I heard and saw nothing. But I was absolutely certain that there was something or somebody there. And when I went back to the office I had made up my mind, if Holliment had not come back when the town clocks next struck, I was going.

The events of the last two or three days—the anxiety consequent upon being stranded, the uncertainty of my prospects—these things had not improved the state of my nerves, and I felt that if I stopped much longer in that place, imagining a Chinaman prowling around, I should become a good deal more of a wreck than I wanted to be. It was not worth the sovereign which I should probably lose by going away—nevertheless, going I was unless Holliment turned up suddenly.

I heard no more of the movements in the big

building, and the time went on slowly until the first stroke of eight broke the prevalent silence. I got out of my chair at that, flung away the newspaper, and seized a pencil and a scrap of paper; I was going to leave a note on the desk telling Holliment that I could not remain longer. I was utterly indifferent by that time as to whether he found the note that night or next morning; indifferent, too, to my sovereign. I wanted to get out and breathe free air. But before I had scribbled two lines I heard a low, sibilant signal, and jumping round as if I had been shot, saw the man I was writing to standing in the gloom of the shop, six yards away, outside the office door, beckoning. How he had got there without my being aware of his entrance I did not stop to think, but I was unfeignedly glad to see him, and stepped almost joyfully in his direction. He put up his hand, unmistakably in warning.

"Pull that blind down in there!" he whispered. "Right down so that no one can see in!"

"It is down," I answered. "Been down since six o'clock."

"Well, turn that lamp down, too," he went on. "And bar that door on the street—quick."

"That's been barred since six o'clock, too," I said, laying a finger on the regulator of the lamp. "It's safe enough."

He waited until the light had gone down to a pale gleam, just clear enough to let us see each other's faces, and then, keeping himself in the shadow, he

came across the floor and into a corner of the office, giving me a narrow, searching glance.

"Anybody been?" he asked, significantly.

I pointed to the memoranda which I had prepared and laid on the desk.

"All down there," I answered. "That's the business part of it."

There was a purposeful significance in my reply, and he was quick to see it.

"And—what else?" he said, anxiously. "Anything—not business?"

"I don't know whether it's business or not, Mr. Holliment," I replied, "but after it got dark, and before I'd fastened up that blind, I chanced to look at the window there, and I saw, his ugly face pressed close against it, a Chinaman."

I was watching him. For the second time that day I saw his face go pasty-white—only, as far as I could make out in that dim light, this time it was whiter than before—and he caught his breath in something like a sob.

"A—a Chinaman!" he whispered. "You're—certain?"

"Never more certain of anything," I retorted. "Dead certain!"

"Well?" he asked, with an obvious effort.

"After that—when I'd drawn this blind and bolted the outer door—I heard stealthy footsteps outside, and saw someone try the handle," I continued. "Since then—some time ago—I heard queer sounds

in that tower-place of yours, and I went in and saw nothing. Queer doings, Mr. Holliment!"

He had his hands in front of him, clasped across his chest, and I noticed that his fingers were working one within the other. If my nerves had been touched a bit, his were undoubtedly ragged.

"Yes," he assented, with a nod. "You—you won't understand——"

"Don't understand anything, and don't want to, Mr. Holliment," I interrupted. "But I'd be obliged if you'd give the sovereign you promised me and let me go. I want to be off."

He pulled out money from his pocket at once, and to my surprise gave me a couple of sovereigns, pushing them at me along the desk with a gesture which clearly meant that I was heartily welcome to them.

"Yes," he said, half abstractedly, "yes, of course you'll be wanting to go. But—not through that door on the street! It would be as much as your life—anybody's life's—worth to go out of that door to-night."

I was glad afterwards that he said that. It pulled me together; steadied my nerves. Instead of being confronted by vague doubts and surmises, I now knew that there was something really dangerous in front, and my hand was steady enough as I picked up and pocketed the two sovereigns.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm much obliged. You'll find all particulars there of what's been done. But

—the rest of it, Mr. Holliment? What's it all about?"

All this time I could see that his ears were on the alert. The man was listening, and for all he was worth; and when he spoke again, it was in still lower tones.

"I said—you wouldn't understand," he answered. "But—I'll tell you this much. That note you brought me this morning—you'd get it from a pal of mine; a big, good-looking fellow? To be sure—and it was a warning. Him and me—we're in danger. There's that broke loose here in Portsmouth that wants to get its own back—you understand."

"The Chinaman!" I suggested.

"Well, he's part of it, though I didn't exactly expect to hear that he'd got to work," he replied. "Part of it!—there's more than him in it. Clear out?—that's the thing while this lot is anywhere about. Quaterwayne—the man you saw—he'll have put himself away in a quiet spot across the water, and so shall I, when we're out of this. Mind you!—I've been off all the time since you came in—yes, but I haven't been a hundred yards away! Lying doggo—safe spot—up the street. And—we must get out, now!"

"How did you get in?" I asked.

"Same way we'll get out," he answered. "Not through that street door, you may bet! I don't want a knife thrust between my ribs. Look here—turn up that lamp! Leave it burning. There's not

much oil in it, and it'll burn itself out. If we leave it burning they'll think we're—at least that I'm—still here. And now, you follow me."

He slipped out into the shadows of the shop again, motioning me to follow him across to the tower-like place at the side. Within that, he paused, gripping my arm. There was some light there from a street-lamp outside; enough, at any rate, to show us the staircase which I had looked at during the afternoon. He pointed to it, and to the darkness high above its final landing.

"Way out there—up that stair—through door at top—and into the next house, which is empty," he whispered. "But the stair—not safe for two! Rotten!—but it'll bear one at a time; I came down it, just now. I'll go first—when I get to the top I'll whistle—then you come up. Bear well to the wall—keep your weight that side, see? All safe, then."

"I don't want to break my neck, Mr. Holliment," I remarked. "Is there no other way—no back entrance?"

"Aye, with a knife the other side of it!" he said. Come on—it's safe enough. I'm twice your weight!"

Suddenly he let go of my arm and I made out that he twisted his hand round to his hips. The next instant I heard a click of something metallic.

"What's that?" I demanded.

"Revolver!" he whispered, "not that I think it'll

be wanted, but—well, here goes! Keep off that stair till I whistle.”

He slipped from my side and vanished into the shadows; a second later I heard him cautiously stealing up the staircase. The sounds that he made, slight as they were, reminded me of what I had heard in that place earlier in the evening. He must have been light-footed, however, for they were very slight sounds indeed, and when he reached the first landing they died away altogether—doubtless the dust lay thick as a carpet up there.

Once, as he crossed another landing, I caught a glimpse of him—a beam of light fell across the wall just there from the gas-lamp outside. He was stealing forward, close to the wall, as he had bade me do, and there was now but another flight of the stair for him to scale before reaching the dark doorway just beneath the first round of the unceilinged roof; I began to nerve myself to follow him.

And then, just as I groped for and laid a hand on the worm-eaten balusters at the foot of the stair, and edged away from them towards the wall, there came a knocking at the street door, the sound of which set my nerves vibrating like suddenly struck fiddle-strings.

CHAPTER III

MY LADY OF THE DAWN

THERE was a certain peculiarity about that knocking. It was not a summons delivered on a door panel by one insistent fist, but by several—a regular tattoo of not-to-be-denied knuckles. Holliment heard it as well as I, and in the middle of it he raised his voice, hitherto muffled, to something very like a shout.

“Come on, man!” he called. “Come on—sharp! Keep to the wall—close!”

That was his second or third warning about the wall, and you may be sure that I took good care, even in that critical moment, not to disregard it. But the wall in itself was a loathsome thing where-with to make so intimate an acquaintance. It was one of those walls which feel—if you are really forced to lay a hand on them—as if the dust and grime of ages have accumulated on their surfaces; it was thick with such accretions, and as I hastily rounded its various twistings, slinking through the gloom like a runaway thief, and always fearful of feeling the unmistakably rotten fabric of the old stairway suddenly collapse beneath me, I felt festoons of cob-

webs catching my shoulders, and what may have been live things slithering across my face and around my fingers.

The beating on the door acted as a spur that sharpened with every step I took, for there was something sinister, if not actually murderous in its suggestion, and up and up I went—up, until, panting and nerve-wracked at the whole thing, I joined Holliment on the topmost landing, and at that instant the knocking ceased and just as suddenly as it had ceased, a new sound broke on us, like to scare the remaining wits out of our heads, and that sound came from the bursting-in of the street door.

I have already said that we had left a lamp burning in the shabby little office, its wick well turned up, and that there was a gas-lamp somewhere outside which threw a certain amount of light through the window, dirty though it was, of the lower part of the tower. In these lights Holliment and I, gazing anxiously from our high perch into the depths beneath, saw a confused gang of three, perhaps four, perhaps five, or there may have been six, rush across the space between the burst-in door and the arched doorway between tower and back shop, pretty much as hounds burst in on a pulled-down fox.

From what I remember of them, they were probably loafers and street-corner scum, bribed to take a hand in a raid on the place, fellows with their greasy caps well pulled down over their eyes, and such like. I am not sure that I did not catch the

gleam of a knife here and there as they crossed and re-crossed the threads of light. No doubt Holliment saw all that I did—but there was one thing that each saw, without any doubt.

As the mob swept from amidst the piles of old rubbish into the tower, a shaft of yellow light fell right on the face of a Chinaman. And at the sight, and before I could lay a finger on his arm to stop him, Holliment whipped out his revolver and fired once, twice, thrice into the middle of our pursuers.

Two cries followed on that—one was a sharp yelp of pain, such as anyone might let out who is stung by a wasp; the other was more of a rising groan. But I am sure that none of the men fell, and just as I had expected, the discharge of these shots, instead of checking the pursuit, only accelerated it. For a second we had a vision of upturned faces, in the next the whole pack made for the old stairway and came storming up it. I heard the tramp and rush of their feet; that was plain enough. But under it, or over it, or somehow, I heard Holliment laugh, at my shoulder. It was not a nice laugh; something in the sound of it made me more afraid than anything that had happened up to then, and I edged away from him, as, in the very instant wherein he laughed, he suddenly seized my arm in a tight, trembling grip.

It was at that instant, too, that the old stair collapsed. I suppose the men were by that time half way up it, storming ahead with shouts of fury.

It suddenly went, with a crashing tearing-to-pieces of rotten timber and rusty bolts, and in a mighty cloud of choking dust, and in that instant also, I was conscious that Holliment dragged me through some doorway immediately behind us, and that we stood, in utter darkness, on sound, safe footing.

But Holliment, evidently, was not minded to allow us to linger; evidently, too, he could either see in the dark, or he knew every inch of the region into which he had led me. Amidst the babel of cries, groans, imprecations that came up from beneath the clouds of dust he tightened his grip on my arm and got his lips to my ear.

"Come on!" he whispered. "That lot's settled! Come on!—step out and don't be afraid. Safe enough, now—straight down this floor—then downstairs—a drink! God!—I hope some of 'em have broken their necks, and I wish they all had! Come on!"

I let him steer me through the darkness, across the floor, refreshingly solid after that rotten staircase, giving myself up to his guidance with a sort of feeling that anything was better than what we had just been through.

He paused after going some dozen steps; released my arm, opened a door, got me through it, released me again, and suddenly turned on the light of a bull's eye lamp, which, I suppose, he had carried all the time in his pocket. And I saw then that we stood at the head of a staircase such as you may see in

any house. Its very ordinariness was as welcome as its shabbiness was obvious.

Holliment's first action was to shoot a couple of heavy bolts across the door through which we had just passed; his second to raise his disengaged hand and draw the cuff of his sleeve across his forehead. Something in his action constrained me to follow his example; I found then that my face was streaming with sweat—big, heavy drops, too—and at the same moment I realised that my tongue not only felt too big for my mouth, but that it was dry and cracked as ancient leather. We looked at each other significantly; he shook his head, but I managed to croak out a word or two.

“You said—a drink?” I rasped at him. “Drink
_____”

He pointed down the stair and began to descend, motioning me to follow.

“All right—drink down here,” he said shakily, over his shoulder. “All safe, this. Empty house—my property, too. Laid doggo down here all day. Come! God alive!—if that lot had broken in on us before we got up that old stair! Kingdom come by this time for both of us! But—safe now. Safe—as safe can be.”

We went down I don't know how many flights of stairs—a great many. We passed several landings; many doors. Some of the doors were shut; some were open. Where a door was open, an empty, cavernous chamber revealed itself. Shaking as I

was, I contrived to keep my eyes about me and to note what I saw.

An old house, this; once a good house; carved balustrades; moulded ceilings; evidence of architectural taste; some old, prosperous merchant's house once upon a time, no doubt. And no doubt, either, that nobody had lived in it for years and years; fifty, sixty, seventy years—wrack, ruin, dirt, dust, everywhere. Silent, too, with the sort of silence that you never find but in deserted houses, and a smell about it like that you get in deep vaults under some old church. We got at last into what was evidently the hall of the house, a big, gloomy place—that is, as far as I could see, for there Holliment managed his bull's eye more warily than ever, and I had but imperfect glimpses of my surroundings.

Once more he stopped before a door, unlocked it, and motioned me to pass through. More stairs, stairs evidently leading to a basement, confronted us, but there was a light at the foot, where an open door showed itself. And in that light I saw, within this door, the edge of a warm-coloured carpet, red, I think, but anyway comfortable, domestic—surely an odd and surprising thing to see in that veritable solitude of a house! A moment later—after more locking and barring of that last door—we were at the foot of this stairway, and there, to my infinite wonder, was a snug and appealing parlour or sitting-room, well furnished with good old stuff, and having in its grate a brightly burning fire.

It was not until I saw the gleam of that fire that I realised that I was cold—cold, utterly cold in a queer sort of way. Holliment may have felt the same sensation; at any rate, as soon as he had set down his bull's eye and had turned up the wick of a moderator lamp that stood on the table, he went straight to a corner cupboard, took out a bottle and glasses, and turning, motioned me to hand over a jug of water that he indicated on the sideboard. I left it to him to mix the drinks; all that I cared about at that moment was to get one, and to get it strong. And I got it—strong enough.

He gave a deep sigh when he had drained half the contents of his tumbler and taken the glass from his lips, and when he had sighed he shook his head at me, and then nodded at the bottle.

"Brandy!" he said. "A matter that I scarcely ever touch—whisky's my tippie, and not over much of that—I'm an abstemious man, on principle. But when you've had a bit of an experience like that, brandy is the thing! I could just do with this—and so could you, my lad! Feel better?"

"So much better, Mr. Holliment," I answered, having swigged off as much of the liquor as he had, "so much better that I'm bold enough to ask you—was it ten minutes since or a hundred years ago?—that I asked you before? What's it all about?"

"And I answer as before, my lad," he replied, quite good-humouredly, "you wouldn't understand. But I'm sorry you chanced to get drawn into it.

However, you're safe. We're both safe—here. But—only just in time. However, again—we *are* safe! With whole skins, too!"

I drank off the rest of the brandy and set down the glass.

"Then you'll let me go, now, Mr. Holliment?" I said. "I daresay you know a safe way out of this house, and——"

He stared at me as if I had proposed some utterly fantastic and impossible thing, and I saw at once that I was condemned already to some indefinite detention.

"Safe way out of this house!" he repeated. "There's no safe way out of this house, my lad, for some hours, if for the rest of the night! You can lay your last penny on that! Be content!—as I said, we're safe here. But outside——!"

He made a significant grimace, at the same time jerking out his disengaged hand in a fashion which suggested a knife-thrust. And again he drank, and it seemed to me that for the second time the glass rattled a little against his teeth. I stared incredulously at him.

"You mean—those fellows?" I asked.

"Such of 'em as haven't broken their damned necks, or legs, or arms," he replied grimly. "Some 'ud get off scot-free, you can bet—such devils' spawn always do! But the rest'll be all round and about, and I'm going to run no more risks for this night. They can't get in here—but, as I said, outside—ah!"

"But the police, Mr. Holliment?" I said. "Surely

they'd be attracted by a row like that, let alone the broken door from the street, and all the rest of it? I should think they'll be on your premises by now."

"You never can tell," he answered. "This is a deserted district, in a way of speaking—not many folk about o' nights, and the nearest policeman that I can think of would be streets away a quarter of an hour ago. Anyway—no risks! Besides, what ails you here? Take a drop more brandy, as I will, and get a smoke—there's cigars, good 'uns, in that box—and when we've pulled round a bit, we'll pick a mouthful of supper, and then consider further. The main thing, my lad, is that we aren't both on our backs in my warehouse, with a few inches of cold steel in our necks! Help yourself this time."

I helped myself—it seemed a wise thing to do, for I was still shaky, and I lighted a cigar, and sat down on a sofa near the fire. Holliment followed suit, and dropped into the easy chair opposite; for a while we sat sipping at our glasses and smoking our tobacco—in silence. Maybe nearly an hour went by before either of us spoke or moved; then Holliment suddenly got up and flung the end of his cigar into the grate.

"I'm all right again!" he said. "Right as ever! That's the brandy. How do you feel yourself, now?"

"As if I hadn't had any," said I. "But if it hadn't been for that scrap next door, I'd have been drunk at this minute!"

"Just so—just so!" he agreed gravely. "I might

have felt that way myself. Something to do with the nervous system, no doubt—doctor's affair, that, and I'm no doctor. But I'll tell you that—I'm hungry. We'll pick a bit—I've a nice round of cold beef and a wedge of prime old cheese—how does it sound? With ale, of course. Plenty of bottled ale on the premises."

"It sounds uncommonly tempting, Mr. Holliment," I answered.

"Then here goes," he said, "I'll prepare matters."

He began to bustle about, and I remained on the sofa, idly watching him. I saw at once that he was a methodical man, and also a man who was particular about the way in which he ate and drank. From a drawer in the centre table he produced a clean white table cloth and even napkins, with carefully cleaned and polished knives and forks; he took down plates from a rack and clear glasses from the side-board, and had presently arranged his table as neatly and deftly as if he had been a well-trained parlour-maid. And having brought from a sort of larder-cupboard in the further recess of the room a round of cold beef, a fine piece of cheese, bread, butter, and a jar of pickled walnuts, he drew the corks of two bottles of ale, poured out the contents, and with a nod to me to draw up to the table, laid hands on his carving knife and fork.

"You'll be hungry by this time—in the natural course of things," he suggested. "Long past anybody's supper time, or dinner time, what?"

"I am hungry, Mr. Holliment," I admitted. "And the sight of your beef makes me hungrier."

"Always keep a snack of something down here," he said, carving delicate slices. "Comes in handy. But you got your dinner all right, eh?"

"And tea, thank you," I replied. "Both very good and plentiful. The man from the Admiral Hawke brought them—as you said he would."

"Jim," he remarked, nodding. "Aye, a civil, obliging fellow, Jim. Been potman there a good many years. You don't know this part of the town?"

"No!" said I. "But I found your place easily enough—on a simple direction or two from your friend Mr. Quartervayne."

He started a little at that, arresting the play of his carving knife.

"Aye, to be sure!" he muttered. "Quartervayne, of course, sent you. I'd forgotten for the moment how we met—odd! And—you'll excuse me?—what were you doing when you met Quartervayne?"

"If you want to know, Mr. Holliment, I was on the Clarence Pier, stranded," I replied. "I'd been stranded here in Portsmouth for two days, expecting a remittance that hadn't come—anyway it hadn't come when I met Quartervayne."

"I remember—I remember!" he said. "He gave you a quid. And where were you wanting to get, now?"

"London," I answered. "I should have gone off to London with Quaterwayne's quid if you hadn't asked me to see to your office."

He had already begun to eat, but at that, his cheek bulging with beef, he laid down his knife and fork, and for a moment stared straight in front of him.

"London?" he suddenly murmured. "London now? Aye, and no bad idea either. If there's a place in the world where a man's safe——"

He broke off, turning to me——

"You still want to get to London?"

"By the first train I can strike as soon as I'm out of this," I answered.

He picked up his knife and fork again, and began to eat steadily.

"Look here!" he said, after a while. "I'll take you to London myself, and I'll go there myself, too! Best place. As long as that damned Chinaman is alive—if he is—and you might as well try to poison the devil—there'll be no . . . but never mind! London's the ticket! Now listen. I've a car—not new, but good—not far from here, and plenty of petrol in her, too, all ready. When we've finished supper, I'll just take a careful look round, and if things seem clear, we'll slip out, get to my car, and be off, what?"

"Nothing would suit me better, Mr. Holliment," I answered, "I'm game!"

"Then it's done, and make a good supper, for it'll

be a coldish ride through what's left of the night," he said. "More beef, now?"

We both made a good supper—a hearty supper. Then we tidied up his table, washing the plates and things at a sink and putting them all in place again. And after that, bidding me not to be afraid during his absence, he went up the stair and let himself out. He was not away more than ten minutes, and his first action on returning was to take down two heavy overcoats, and to hand one to me with a nod which signified that all was right. Then he turned out the lamp, led me out, and up to the hall of which I have already spoken. We got out of that by some means known to him, and then through alleys and courts to a yard where, in the darkness, stood a car. Close by was a half-open door, through which a light showed—Holliment went within this and presently came back with two glasses in his hand, one of which he handed to me with the remark that it was a drop of whisky to keep the cold out. We drank—and then he bade me get inside the car, and, if I liked, go to sleep; he himself would drive, and I obeyed his bidding . . . and before we had cleared the town was hard and fast asleep.

I woke suddenly, with a great start, imagining that a yellow-faced Chinaman had thrust a knife into my ribs. But I did not find myself in Holliment's car. Instead, I found myself lying on a bank of heather, on the topmost heights of a far stretching down. There was the full glory of a

Springtide dawn all round me, and at my side, holding a smart cob by its bridle, and gazing curiously at my startled eyes, stood the handsomest girl I had ever seen in my twenty-three years of life.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHALK-PIT

UTTERLY confounded as I was by this sudden coming back to waking life, I had sufficient of sense about me to comprehend what I saw. And the main thing was the girl. She was a tallish, slimmish creature, dressed in riding-coat and breeches and nattily finished off, even to her white cravat and polished boots, early though the hour was; a sort of Amazon girl in a way, though essentially feminine; the red-gold of her hair struck me, and the brown lights in her eyes, and the warmth in her cheeks and lips, and her lips were just then unmistakably severe, not to say hard, and there was a bit of a frown between her finely arched eyebrows which seemed to argue a temper that was not far off being roused. I saw, too, what had made me think of the Chinaman's knife in connection with my ribs; the girl carried a substantial hunting-crop, and finding me there asleep she had poked me with it until I came awake. Indeed, she was pushing it pretty vigorously into my arm-pit when I succumbed to its invitation and opened my eyes on her.

I struggled up into a sitting posture and took a good long stare at her, and her cob, and at the turf and heather around me. When my eyes got back to hers she spoke.

"What are you doing there? Out with it, now!"

She had a sweet voice but I never heard a school-master speak more peremptorily, and the very insistence of her note cleared my brain—somewhat.

"That," I answered, "is just what I'd like to know!"

The frown between her eyebrows grew deeper at that, and I saw her thin fingers tighten round the hunting-crop.

"Don't tell lies, now!" she commanded. "You've been sleeping out—here! Overslept yourself, of course, and I caught you before you could wake and hide yourself. Now don't go lying or prevaricating to me! You've been sleeping out to watch—those!"

She suddenly lifted the hunting-crop and twisting round a little, pointed along the Down behind her. And then I saw, on a plateau of level land, a string of race-horses at walking exercise. Mechanically I counted them—one, two, three, four, five. And I realised what she meant. She had thought that I was some spy, lurking up there to get a surreptitious peep at what might, for aught I knew, be some valuable bit of horse-flesh.

"Answer!" she insisted. "Isn't that it?"

I shook my head with what was doubtless a sickly smile.

"Certainly not that!" said I. "Horses? Good Lord!—I scarcely know a horse from a camel! I suppose those are race-horses? Yes—but I've never even seen a horse-race! No—I'm not here for that!"

"Then why are you here?" she demanded, eyeing me over with growing wonder. "You—you speak like a gentleman—you're well dressed—you're—what's it mean? This is a private part of the Down—my property. What are you doing on it?—asleep, on a March morning? Look!—your clothes are covered with dew!"

That seemed to me a very unimportant detail. But I looked along myself and saw that my neat blue serge suit certainly looked as if gossamer webs had been spun over it. And at that I essayed to rise—got to my knees—then my feet—and on the instant reeled like a drunken man. In a flash the girl had an arm round my shoulders, and her voice changed to the tones of womanly solicitude.

"What's the matter?" she exclaimed anxiously. "Are—are you ill?"

I made a big effort and caught hold of the cob's saddle. He was a substantial beast, and I got a sense of security from holding on to him. And at that the girl suddenly thrust her hand in one of the pockets of her skirted coat and bringing out a little silver flask hastily unscrewed the top and thrust the flask into my free hand.

"Drink!" she commanded.

I drank. Brandy—good old brandy. It brought

back Holliment and last night, and it steadied me. I pushed the flask back to her with a nod and looked slowly round. On that side the ground fell away to a valley; beyond the valley I saw ridge after ridge of rolling country, with here and there a spire and here and there the gables and chimneys of halls and farmsteads, and in the blue distance the domes and towers of a town; beyond that, sea. I pointed to the town.

"What's that place?" I asked of her.

"That?" she exclaimed. "Portsmouth!"

I straightened myself up against the cob's shoulder.

"Very well!" I said. "The last thing I remember before you woke me up was riding out of Portsmouth in a motor-car! I've no more idea than you have how I came to be here. But I think I must have been drugged. Where am I?"

Her eyes were wide open with perplexity by that time, but she answered readily enough.

"Where are you? These are Chilverton Downs—twelve miles from Portsmouth," she said. "You say you left there in a car? When?"

"About midnight," I answered. "But which particular midnight I don't know. Yet—I must have been drugged. I fell asleep the instant I got in the car and then I never knew any more. Is—does any road from Portsmouth to London cross these Downs?"

"No direct road," she replied, "but there is a road

fifty yards away from where we're standing—just behind that big clump of gorse. Who drove you?"

"Um!" said I. "I wonder! For now I'm not certain. I thought—but its no use speculating. Drugged? Yes, of course. That last drink!"

"Were—were you drunk? she asked with sudden directness.

"Drunk? No!" I laughed. "If you knew——"

But in that instant I paused. I wanted my handkerchief and had put my hand in my inner breast pocket to pull it out. There was something other than the handkerchief there. Money! Coin! My fingers sank on it—hard, metallic.

"Good Lord!" I said. "What on earth is this?"

I began to pull it out, pouring it from one hand to the other—sovereigns!—no end of them; eventually I had a palm heaped full, and like to run over. Those were the days wherein the sight of a sovereign amazed nobody; nevertheless, the girl uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Yes!" I said. "That's just what I feel. But—hullo, here's more!"

There was a paper, crumpled up anyhow, at the bottom of my pocket. I pulled it out and made shift to open it. Four words only—scrawled in pencil.

Keep a quiet tongue!

I knew she wanted to see that paper. And I was not going to show it to her. I put it back; put

the gold back, and made a big effort to get all my wits together. Then I looked at her.

"I'm very sorry to have been found on your private land," I said as politely as possible, "and I'm grateful to you for the brandy and—and for your interest. The truth is, I was mixed up, accidentally, in a most extraordinary adventure last night, in Portsmouth. The man who shared it with me promised to drive me to London and gave me a stiff drink just before starting. He must have drugged me, and, when he got here, left me—where you found me. Now I'll go away. But I'm still queer and a bit faint—can you tell me of any inn or cottage where I can go and sit down awhile?"

She had listened to all this with close attention, watching me narrowly, and now, without a word, she drew a silver whistle from her pocket and blew sharply on it. A man whom I had noticed sitting motionless on a horse at some little distance turned quickly at the sound and came cantering up. He was a typically horsey sort of fellow, keen-faced, shrewd-eyed, and he gave me a questioning glance as he approached.

"Bradgett!" said the girl. "I'm going down to the house. See to everything—I shan't come up again this morning."

The man touched his cap, groom-fashion, and went off in the same silence in which he had approached, and the girl turned to me.

"Come along to my house," she said. "I'll give

you some breakfast. Take hold of the cob's saddle, it'll help you to walk."

I was glad enough of that; I was feeling queerer then than I had when I came back to consciousness.

"You're very good to a perfect stranger—found under curious conditions," I said, as she led me down the hillside. "May I know to whom I'm indebted so much?"

She gave me a queer look, and a smile began to dimple her cheek.

"You said you'd never seen a horse-race, I think?" she remarked.

"Never!" said I. "I know nothing about horse-racing matters—nothing."

"I thought not," she answered, with a laugh. "Or you'd have known me. I'm Miss Margaret Manson, the trainer. Did you never hear of the great Kit Manson, who trained five Derby and six St. Leger winners? He was my father, and when he died two years ago I succeeded to his business. And why I was so insistent on knowing how you came there and what you were doing was because I've got a Derby candidate in training, and I don't want any strange folk peeping and prying round, don't you see? I thought you were a spy."

"Innocent enough, Miss Manson," I answered. "My name's Cranage, James Cranage—I'm really an actor by profession, but of late I've been secretary to Barrett Oliver, the famous actor-manager. Oliver's gone to Australia, on tour, and I didn't

want to go with him, and I'm looking out for another post. As to how I came to get mixed up in the adventure I spoke of just now, perhaps I'll tell you _____"

"Wait till you've had some breakfast," she broke in. "You look a bit shaky yet. But we've not far to go—only round the corner of that spinney. These . . ."

There presently came into view a house and stables which until then had been concealed by the thick covert to which she had just pointed. Never having seen a training establishment before I was astonished at the size and range of both, and at the almost palatial character of the private residence into which I was presently conducted. And on the threshold I paused.

"Your servants," said I, "will think you've brought some tramp or other to breakfast."

"Not when you've had a good wash!" she retorted with a laugh. "That seems to be all you need—at a pinch. But first, come into the dining-room."

She was clearly a girl of understanding and resource. She took me into a fine dining-room, led me up to the sideboard, and from a cellaret produced a small bottle of champagne, which she proceeded to open very deftly with her slim fingers.

"You drink that!" she commanded, pouring out the creamy liquid. "And you'll feel a new man. Then I'll turn you loose in the bath-room, and by breakfast time—eh?"

She laughed merrily as she handed me the glass, and I laughed, too, catching the infection.

"Bless you!" I said. "You're a good sort, anyhow! Long life and every happiness to you!"

I did feel a new man an hour later—she had had razors and things laid out for me in the bath-room, and when, washed and cleaned, I went down to breakfast I scarcely realised that two hours before I had been found lying like an outcast on the open heath. I saw, too, that she looked at me with approval as I entered the room where she was waiting with a pleasant-faced oldish lady whom she introduced as her aunt, Miss Millie Hepple.

"Better?" she asked as we sat down to breakfast.

"I should be more ungrateful—and more graceless—than I am if I weren't!" I said. "Yes, thank you, I'm so much better that if it pleases you to hear it, I'll tell you the story of my adventures yesterday and last night."

"I won't deny that I've got a truly feminine curiosity about it," she laughed as she began to carve a fine York ham that stood before her. "Tell me, by all means—if you want to."

"I do want!" I answered firmly. "I think you're a young lady of judgment and common sense, and I should just like to know what you've got to say about the whole thing. For its absolutely beyond me, and I don't know whether I ought not to go back to Portsmouth and get in touch with the police. However . . ."

Over that breakfast table I told the two ladies the whole story, from my meeting with Quartervayne on the Clarence Pier to my finding myself on the top of Chilverton Downs. I spared no detail, telling them by word of mouth what I have here set out in writing. The telling produced different effects in each listener. Miss Hepple, who, later on, admitted to me that she loved sensational fiction, was amazed to find that things actually happen in real life which are at least as strange as those imagined by the professional story-teller; she took the whole in with zest and appetite. But Miss Manson's interest was of a practical sort; I saw that she was putting two and two together, reckoning chances, speculating on probabilities; the more I told, the more thoughtful she became.

"And that's the end!" I concluded abruptly.

She gave me a straight glance.

"You mean—that's the beginning," she said. "Or, if it's the end, it's merely the end of the first chapter. Of course, the thing has only begun. Curtain on Act One—that's where you've got to. Next—Act Two."

"Not with me in it!" said I, determinedly.

"How do you know?" she questioned. "You may be dragged—forced—into it. Anyway, as I say, it's only the beginning."

"What I want to know," observed Miss Hepple from behind her tea-tray, "is—what does it all mean? You don't know, of course, sir?"

"I've no more idea, ma'am," I replied, "than I have of the merits of the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy. All I know is—what I've told you. Up to now—the whole thing is a mystery."

"Have you counted that money?" asked Miss Manson, suddenly.

"I have! There's a hundred pounds in sovereigns," I answered.

"Hush-money, of course," she observed.

"Something of the sort, no doubt," said I. "Still, considering what I went through last night, I think I'm entitled to it."

"Stick to it, anyway," said she. "But as to telling the police, I think I should await developments. Wait for the next news. You never know —"

Even as she spoke, the next news, the next development, was at hand. A maid came in, to tell her that Bradgett was in the hall, and anxious to see her. She left the breakfast table hurriedly. I could see that she was already alarmed and wondering if anything had befallen any of her precious charges. But within two minutes she looked in at the open door of the room and nodded at me.

"Mr. Cranage," she said, "will you come out here?"

I went out. Bradgett was standing a little way down the wide hall; she drew me in the opposite direction.

"Have you any idea as to what sort of car it was

that you were driven away in, last night?" she asked in a whisper.

"What sort? Do you mean make?" I replied. "No—no idea whatever. It was dark, pitch dark, in the yard we started from. All I know is that it was a car—a very second-hand sort of car, I should say—why?"

"Wait a minute," she answered. Then she turned to Bradgett. "All right, Bradgett," she called. "I'll go there myself. Did you say the Upper Chalk-Pit?"

"That's it, miss—the Upper Chalk-Pit," replied Bradgett. "At the bottom, of course."

"Very well—I'll go now," she said. Then, as the man left the hall, she turned to me again. "One of our boys has just come in with news that a motor-car, hopelessly wrecked, of course, has been found this morning at the bottom of a chalk-pit, half a mile away. Gone clear over the edge—a drop of, oh, perhaps seventy or eighty feet!"

"With anybody in it?" I exclaimed. "Seventy or eighty feet! Why, then——"

"But that's the queer thing," said she. "There isn't a trace of anybody. Of course, if there had been anybody in it, a plunge of eighty feet—eh?"

We stood for a moment in silence, staring at each other. Then she turned to a stand close by, picked out an ashplant walking-stick, and motioning me to take another moved off towards the hall door.

"Come along!" she said. "We've both finished

breakfast, and we'll go to look at it. For I'm already wondering—is this the car that brought you to the top of the Downs?"

"And if it is," said I, "where's Holliment? For Holliment certainly drove it. And if it is his car and he went over with it——"

"That's utterly impossible," she declared. "No man could go over the edge of that chalk-pit and fall eighty feet and then get away alive. But it's no use speculating—let's get there."

She led me out of the grounds, along the hillside, and up a sort of mountain road for half a mile. Suddenly turning off this and crossing a bit of wiry turf she brought me up sharp on the very lip of the chalk-pit—unfenced, unprotected in any way. And looking down we saw the car, a good eighty feet below. It seemed to me that it was smashed into as many fragments as there are seas in the world. There were people, shepherds, farm lads, gapers from a village close by, gathered about it, and we went down the hillside by a sheep-track and joined them. There was a policeman there, too; he told us that the matter must have occurred during the early hours of the morning, for he himself had been in the chalk-pit with a game watcher at midnight, and there was then nothing to notice; he said too that the lad who had first found the wreckage, at seven o'clock, had seen nothing of any human being in connection with it. And then he drew our attention to a significant fact—there was nothing amongst

the wreckage by which the car could be identified—all that sort of thing had been removed.

“And there’s only one conclusion to come to, Miss Manson,” he wound up. “This here car has been deserted by its driver up on top there and then started and made to leap the edge! Now, why?”

CHAPTER V

THE OLD STAGE QUEEN

THAT question, obvious enough, was doubtless agitating the minds of the twelve or twenty country folk who stood around, dividing their stares between the wrecked car and ourselves. But the policeman had more to say, and was eager to say it.

"I've been up on top there, Miss Manson," he went on, pointing to the brow of the chalk-pit high above where we stood. "Yes, I went up there as soon as I set eyes on this mess, though, of course, I made sure to begin with that there wasn't no dead body nor parts o' one lying down here. And I took a careful look round, miss, not only at what's just above, but at the road beyond. Of course, a trained eye, like mine, sees what—well, what other people don't see. You'll understand me?"

"Perfectly, Roberts," replied Miss Manson. "And you saw—what?"

"This here, miss," answered the policeman with proud assurance. "That there car came along the road that runs behind your place, across the shoul-

der of the hill, and from the south—it didn't come t'other way. 'Cause why? Before ever going up there I took a careful look at them tyres—you'll see they're of a peculiar make, and therefore have a peculiar impression.

"Now then, you'll find that impression coming up the road from near your place, not down the road, and if you and this gentleman'll go up there, you'll find that right above this chalk-pit them impressions in the road surface stop—sharp! I'll tell you what happened, miss—the fellow as had this car pulled up there. Then he probably took a look round—and over this here formidable cavity, though it's likely he knew of it before. Then he got his car on to the turf above that edge, jumped off himself while she was moving, and let her—rip! He stood up there—safe, and she went over the edge—smash! How's that—miss?"

"It does great credit to your powers of observation and deduction, Roberts," said Miss Manson. "If I were you, as you're still youngish, I should go in for the detective service."

"Well, and I've thought of that before now, miss," remarked the gratified policeman. "However, there's one thing beats me about this job, and it's this—What object could any man have in wrecking a car like this—deliberate? 'Taint what you'd call a first-class nor yet a second-class car, and it ain't even middle-aged, neither, by its looks, but still, 'twas serviceable and 'twas property. You'd think

'twas the act of a madman, this here, now 'wouldn't you, miss?'"

Miss Manson replied that she was quite in agreement with the policeman's sentiments, and then she and I returned to the top of the chalk-pit and verified his statement about the impressions on the light surface of the hillside road. There was no doubt whatever that the car had come to this point from near that at which I had been deposited during the night, nor that the running of it over the edge of the chalk-pit had been a deliberate act, for on examining the edges of the roadway more carefully we saw the place whereat it had been turned off at almost right angles and another place where it had evidently rested on the turf before being re-started and sent to destruction.

"That's the car in which you were brought from Portsmouth," declared my companion, with firm conviction. "That's certain."

"Yes," I directed. "But where's its driver? And what did he do this for? And don't you think I'd better go back to Portsmouth and tell the police all I know?"

"No, I don't think I should if I were you," she answered. "You've done nothing—you merely fell into a curious combination of circumstances. If I were in your place I should just wait to see what happens."

"And stick to this money?" I asked, tapping my pocket, where the gold felt unpleasantly heavy.

"Why not? It was put there," she said. "Certainly I should stick to it! But you'll hear something—sooner or later. There's some mystery behind all this. And—what are you going to do, now?"

"Go on to London, I suppose," I answered. "Where's the nearest station?"

"That's five or six miles away," she replied. "But—I'd an idea for you."

"An idea?—for me?" I exclaimed, looking my surprise. "What?"

"Do you want another secretaryship?" she asked.

"I want any good and decent job—of that sort," I answered. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't very much of a success on the stage—I think I'm better fitted for the other sort of thing. Why, do you know of anybody who wants a secretary?"

"Have you references and testimonials?" she enquired in a business-like fashion. "Real good ones?"

For answer I pulled out my pocket-book, extracted certain letters and papers from it, and handed them to her in silence. In silence she read them all through, then, handing them back, she pointed across the valley to a big house, half hidden amongst trees, that stood above the little village which I had noticed when we were at the chalk-pit.

"You see that place?" she said. "That's Renardsmere House. Lady Renardsmere lives there—when she isn't in town. Perhaps you don't recognise her under that name. She was once—some

time ago—a well-known actress—Helena, Reading. You know that name, of course. She married Sir William Renardsmere. Now he's dead and she's got all his lands and his money—no end of it. And for the last five years or so she's gone in for racing, and I've got her Derby candidate in my stable—Rippling Ruby. . .”

“Rippling Ruby!” I exclaimed. “Why, of course I know her name! She's high up in the betting, isn't she?”

“Three to one at present,” she answered, almost indifferently. “But she'll start at odds on, or my name isn't Peggie Manson! Rippling Ruby will win the Derby as certain as that's my house and that those are my stables and that this is my land! However, that's neither here or there. The real thing just now—for you—is that Lady Renardsmere, who loathes writing even a note and hates accounts, wants—a secretary. I should say that you, with your references and testimonials, and especially that letter from Barrett Oliver, are just the man for her!”

“It's awfully good of you to think of it!” I said. “You're a true Samaritan, Miss Manson.”

“Oh, I don't know!” she laughed. “Always willing to do a good turn, though. Now look here—there's nothing like doing things at once. My dear old father always said the three finest words in the world were—Do it now! I'll go across with you to Lady Renardsmere—I want to see her this morning, so

we shall kill two birds with one stone. But first come to the stables, and I'll show you the little lady that's going to win the Derby."

She led me through the gardens surrounding her house to the training quarters close by. To me, who had never seen any establishment of this sort before, and who had no idea whatever of the conditions under which thoroughbreds are trained, the whole place was a marvel; what seemed still more marvellous was that a mere girl could manage it. But I soon saw that Miss Margaret Manson was not merely mistress but absolute autocrat; the whole army of men and boys which we passed under review evidently trembled at her nod and hung on her lightest word—no commanding officer crossing his barracks yard could possibly have been received with more respect and obedience than she was as she queened it through her little empire.

Not less of a queen seemed Rippling Ruby in the jealously guarded and specially watched domain to which her trainer led me. I knew nothing of horseflesh then and was awfully ignorant of the various points of a thoroughbred; all I knew was that I was invited to look at what seemed to me the equivalent, in the horse world, of a very beautiful woman in our own—an exquisitely modelled thing of life and fire, whose bright bay coat, brilliant eyes, delicate nostrils, and perfectly moulded limbs suggested all sorts of things beyond my imagination. And when Miss Manson with a hand on the creature's

neck, and a couple of stable-boys looking on reverently, asked me if this wasn't a beauty, all I could do was—metaphorically—to fall down and worship.

"Has—has she ever run in a race?" I asked, timidly.

The attendants—for one horrified second—turned their faces on me and opened their mouths in sheer, incredulous astonishment; the next, they sighed gently and once more relapsed into stolid respectfulness. Miss Manson laughed.

"Oh, yes, she's run in a race!" she answered. "She's run twice. She won the Champagne Stakes at Doncaster last year, as a two-year old, by three lengths, and she carried off the One Thousand Guineas at Newmarket only last week, by four. That's her little record! Yes—she's run . . . a bit!"

"I told you I knew nothing about racing," I said, humbly. "Well—here's my best respects and good wishes to her! And I'll go to Epsom to see her win the Derby."

"I don't think there's much doubt that you'll go there," remarked Miss Manson, a moment later as she and I left the box, "that's pretty certain!"

"Why?" I asked, looking at her in surprise.

"Because I think Lady Renardsmere will give you the job," she replied readily. "She's a great affection for anybody or anything that has to do or has had to do with her old profession, and the main

fact that you've trodden the boards and been connected with Barrett Oliver will be an enormous recommendation. But come along!—we'll go across to Renardsmere House."

She led me—this time by a different path—back to the valley, and through the village which I had already seen from the hillside. It was a quaint, old-world place, with a grey church, thatched cottages, farmsteads set amidst old trees, and a general air of quiet prosperity. Small as it was, I noticed that it possessed a roomy-looking, old-fashioned inn; the swinging sign outside bore the name "The Renardsmere Arms."

"Everything here is Renardsmere," observed Miss Manson, seeing me look at this. "The name of the village is Renardsmere; the inn is Renardsmere; the big house is Renardsmere. But I suppose you'll think of Lady Renardsmere as Helena Reading?"

"I've seen pictures of her as Helena Reading," I said. "But of course I never saw her on the stage. She was a great beauty, I believe."

"By jove, she isn't now, though!" exclaimed Miss Manson. "I suppose there are traces of it, but—however, you'll see her in five minutes."

We found Lady Renardsmere in a corner of her extensive gardens. It had been very evident to me as we passed through them that she employed a big staff of gardeners, but the fact remains that when we discovered her, her ladyship, in a coarse and

much stained garden dress, and with an old hat tied on to her head by an equally disreputable scarf, was digging straw manure with a five-pronged fork into a bed of soil destined for some purpose best known to herself. She straightened her tall figure at our approach, knocking one hand into the small of her back as she steadily inspected me—a stranger. And I just as steadily inspected her. A queer woman! I thought—with a deeply lined, strangely seamed face, an odd mouth, and a pair of dark eyes still full of fire.

“Who’s that young fellow?” she demanded before we had come within six paces of her. “Friend of yours, Peggie Manson? Good-looking lad, too—knows how to hold himself—umph!”

“This is a young gentleman, Lady Renardsmere, who has heard that you want a secretary, and thinks he could serve you well,” replied Miss Manson, as I made my bow. “He’s already been secretary to the famous actor-manager, Barrett Oliver, and he’s got splendid testimonials.”

I saw a curious gleam come into the old woman’s eyes.

“Barrett Oliver! Good Lord!—he was just starting when I finished!” she said. “Umph!—and what’s your name, my lad?”

“My name, Lady Renardsmere, is James Cranage,” I answered.

“Been on the stage yourself, eh?” she demanded sharply. “Thought so! I could see that! You

know how to keep your chin up and speak your mother's tongue. Umph!"

She drew off her gardening gloves and threw them aside.

"Where are your papers?" she asked. "Let's see them."

I handed over the references and testimonials which I had already shown to Miss Manson. The old lady read them through with a countenance that betrayed nothing; in the end she selected two letters and pointed at the signatures and addresses.

"These two gentlemen knew you personally?" she asked.

"Intimately—from childhood, Lady Renardsmere," I replied.

"I'll telephone to 'em during the day," she said. "You come here to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. Then we'll settle matters. I'll keep your papers till then—all right. Now, Peggie Manson, what do you want?"

I made Lady Renardsmere a bow and withdrew to the edge of that particular corner of the garden in which my possibly future employer was toiling like any day-labourer. In five minutes Miss Manson joined me, and we went away.

"Odd woman!" I remarked when we were clear of her presence.

"Odd? Wait till you know her!" exclaimed Miss Manson. "But I'll tell you this—she's the kindest-hearted woman in England."

"They seem thick hereabouts," said I, shyly. "Or else I'm exceptionally lucky!"

"No compliments!" she commanded. "Well, you're to go there at ten to-morrow. What'll you do until then?"

"Where's the nearest town—with decent shops?" I asked.

"There is no nearest town," she replied. "But there's a big village—Chilbourne—with good shops—two miles down the road from Renardsmere."

"Then I shall go there, get myself a few necessities, come back, and put myself up at the Renardsmere Arms for the night," I answered. "And if, to-morrow morning, Lady Renardsmere looks with favour on me, and engages me, I shall ask twenty-four hours leave so that I can run up to town to get my belongings."

"She'll engage you all right," said Miss Manson, drily. "I know her, she took to you as soon as ever she set her sharp old eyes on you! You're in luck."

"Been in luck—no end of luck—ever since six o'clock this morning, haven't I?" I suggested. "All that's necessary now, I should think, is to rake up all the money I can, put it on Rippling Ruby for the Derby, and——"

"I never advise boys to bet," she interrupted, rather severely. "You leave betting alone! Now, as we're at the inn, you'd better go in and make your arrangements—I'm off, for I've a lot to do."

She gave me a smile and a nod and was turning

off by a path that led to the hillside when I made bold to call her back.

"Well?" she asked, still smiling.

"I—I may see you again, mayn't I?" I suggested.

"If you fix things up with Lady Renardsmere—as I'm pretty certain you will—you'll probably be sick to death of seeing me!" she retorted. "Now go in there and make your arrangements!"

She went off, resolutely, and without looking back, at that, and I turned into the Renardsmere Arms, and explained to its landlady that having some business with her ladyship at the big house I found it necessary to stay the night in the village. This procured me the best room; having seen it, I went into the bar-parlour to get a drink before walking along to Chilbourne. There were villagers in there, men taking a noontide glass, and they were talking about the wrecked car in the chalk-pit. And, as is usual in these circumstances and places, there was present the man who knows better than anybody. He sat in a corner, with a pot of ale before him, and laid down the law.

"Don't 'ee go for to tell I that there bain't a mortal lot o' sarcumstance aback o' that there business!" he was saying when I went in. "Deal o' talk goin' about as respects that there car at bottom of old chalk-pit. Policeman, now, he says this and he say that, but I reckon I do know what it all mean—sure—ly!"

"Well, an' what do it mean, then?" demanded another man.

"It mean one o' these here burg'lies what you reads about i' the noospapers," declared the oracle. "Burg'ly!—that's what that do siggerfy! .Some o' these here gentlemen thieves, what comes from London way. You do wait till 'tis evenin' and if you don't hear o' some big house here around bein' cracked open during the night as is past and gone, and all the goold watches and the silver forkses taken, then my name isn't what I reckon 'tis! Burg'ly—goold watches and silver forkses!"

"What's that got to do wi' a moty-car bein' found bottom o' chalk-pit?" asked an incredulous voice. "I don't see——"

"You bain't a man of a consekytive turn o' mind, you bain't," interrupted the oracle. "You ain't got no trains o' thought same as what I do possess. I do figger it out this here fashion. These here fellows—swell mobsmen they do call 'em—they comes down from London in a oldish moty-car. They breaks in and steals, which is Scripture. Then they gits away across the Downs. And to cover up their tracks they runs old moty-car over edge of chalk-pit, and smashes she up, complete, while they walks off quiet in another direction. That be the way of it! Walks off, nice and proper, wi' all the silver and goold in their pockets!"

A dead silence followed upon this remarkable and ingenious theory. It was broken at last

by a thoughtful-looking man who had listened intently.

"There med be something in that, too," he observed. "And I did hear word not an hour ago, in Chilbourne Down valley, as how there was two strangers seen in there very first thing this morning, afore sun up, a-making for nearest railway station. One was a big heavy man, and t'other was a little heavy man. . ."

I drank off my glass of ale and went out. Quartermayne and Holliment, as sure as fate! One big; the other little; both heavily made. What did it mean? I could understand them dragging me and depositing me on the Downs—I could understand the gold in my pocket, and the hastily scribbled note, there was reason in all that, from their standpoint. But why wreck the car?

However, it was no use speculating about these things at that juncture. I had my own affairs to think of. I looked about me that afternoon, spent the night comfortably at the Renardsmere Arms, and next morning called on Lady Renardsmere at precisely ten o'clock. Five minutes later she had engaged me as her secretary.

CHAPTER VI

THE THREE STRANGE MEN

THE situation into which I was thus pitch-forked by the vagaries of a whimsical Fortune bade fair at first sight to be by no means undesirable or unpleasant. Indeed, it looked as if I was about to live in clover. Lady Renardsmere, having engaged me at a salary fixed by herself and far beyond what I had intended to ask of her, gave me a couple of rooms for my very own, told off one of her many domestics to wait upon me, and intimated that outside my secretarial duties I was free to do what I liked with my time and was to regard my own particular corner of her big house as my castle.

I fetched my belongings from London and settled down. The first thing was to find out what my new employer desired. That was soon ascertained. Her ladyship proved to have two special aversions—she loathed writing letters and she hated to keep accounts. But oddly enough she was most punctilious about answering all her letters the very day she got them, and as to accounts she was meticulously particular about every penny of her expenditure being booked.

My job, then, was to answer every letter she received—even her private ones, which were not many—and to keep her account books. During the whole time I was with her, I never saw her put pen to paper, except to sign cheques, and it was just as well that she was sparing of her penmanship, for a bigger, more sprawling fist I never saw in my life—her signature spread itself over the entire surface of the lower half of a cheque, and looked as if it had been scrawled with a gardener's wooden pen rather than with the big quills which she affected.

She was a queer woman in most ways—utterly extravagant and careless where thousands of pounds were in question; mean and parsimonious to the last degree when it came to a question of pence. I saw instances wherein she was foolishly prodigal in spending her money—yet there was never a week passed without a row if butcher's meat advanced a halfpenny a pound, or salmon rose from half-a-crown to three shillings. Rough of tongue, eminently masculine rather than feminine, delighting in hard physical toil in her gardens rather than in books or music and the artistic things of life, this old queen of the stage was an oddity and a puzzle—but as Peggy Manson had said, she was kind-hearted to the last degree, and there was not a soul in the neighbouring village who did not benefit by her humanistic feeling.

As for her servants, of whom, in my opinion, she had far too many, they held her in great awe and

equally great affection. I think, too, they regarded her as a good deal of an eccentricity of whose next movements they were never sure, and I speedily discovered that you never knew what Lady Renardsmere was going to do next; she would go off to town in one of her magnificent cars (there were at least half a dozen in her garage, of one sort or another) at literally a moment's notice, and turn up again at all or any hours of the night, and woe betide the cook—a Frenchman, who always wore a worried air—if he were not able to give her dinner at two o'clock in the morning. Queer, decidedly!—but as far as I was concerned, easy enough to get on with, so long as you were quick to anticipate her wishes and to do just what she wanted without fuss or question.

I found out all this within my first fortnight at Renardsmere House. And during that fortnight I heard nothing of the Portsmouth affair. I never say anything in the newspapers about it, though I took the trouble to send to Portsmouth for copies of the local papers. Of course I heard nothing about either Holliment or Quartervayne. And in Renardsmere nobody—not even the sapient policeman—heard anything or discovered anything about the wrecked car. The village carpenter, remarking that it was a shame to see good stuff lying about, removed all of the wreckage that was worth removing to one of his sheds—if nobody ever turned up to claim it, he said, he'd find some use for it himself.

My own belief was that he would have been quite safe in using whatever he liked just then—Holli-ment in throwing away that car had thrown a cover over the whole episode that was not meant to be lifted. My opinion was that he had cleared out, and that I should never hear of him and his strange doings again.

But at the end of that fortnight the curtain went up once more—on Act Two.

The landlord of the Renardsmere Arms was one Holroyd—Ben Holroyd, a Yorkshireman, who had drifted South as groom, or coachman in his younger days, saved money in his various situations, and had eventually, after some years' service with Sir William Renardsmere, changed his mode of life and taken over the licence of the village inn. He was a shrewd, sharp fellow, ably assisted in his business by his wife, who had been cook at one of the big houses in the neighbourhood; in addition to his trade as licenced victualler he carried on another in hay, straw, and horse-corn. Lady Renardsmere had extensive dealings with him in these things, and it was part of my job to go down and pay his weekly bill every Saturday morning. And on the third Saturday after my settling down at Renardsmere House, being at the inn for this purpose, Holroyd, when I had squared his book, gave me a glance which seemed to suggest privacy and mystery.

"Mr. Cranage!" he said, bending over his bar

counter. "There's a word or two I wanted to say to you—between ourselves, like."

"Yes?" I responded. "What, now?"

There was no one but ourselves in the bar-parlour, the morning being still early, but he lowered the tone of his voice almost to a whisper, at the same time glancing at the door, as a man does who has no wish to be overheard.

"There was a fellow in here yesterday," he began, "that knew you!"

He stopped abruptly on the last word, glancing more mysteriously than ever in my direction. But I affected indifference, though I had an idea that something unusual was coming.

"There are a great many people who know me, Holroyd," I answered. "And I know a great many people. Who was this particular person?"

"He was a chap they call Jim," he answered, eyeing me more closely. "He's potman at the Admiral Hawke Tavern—somewhere in Portsmouth."

"Oh!" I said. "Dear me! And—he knew me?"

"I'll tell you all about it," he replied. "It was this way. This chap—Jim—has some relation here in this village: I made out that he'd come from Portsmouth to spend the day with him. He turned in here about noon, for a drink, and we got talking a bit. We were standing in that window there, looking out on the street, and you went by. He saw you—and he gave a bit of a start. 'Hello!' he says, 'who's that young gentleman that's passing

along there?" 'Why,' says I, 'do you know him?' 'I know him by sight well enough,' he says, 'seen him in Portsmouth, I have, but I don't know his name nor who he is.' 'Well,' says I, 'that's Mr. Cranage, Lady Renardsmere's secretary, up at the big house.' 'Oh!' he says, 'that's it, is it? Lives here, eh?' 'Not been here long, though,' I says. Then he seemed to get into a brown study like. 'Well,' he says, at last 'it's a queer thing!' 'What's a queer thing?' says I. 'Why—seeing him here!' he says. 'Do you object to seeing him here?' says I. 'Not me!' he says. 'No business o' mine, guv'nor. But I'll tell you what,' he says, confidential-like, 'between you and me and the wall—I know them in Portsmouth that 'ud be main glad to know where he is!—I do so!' 'Oh?' says I, 'what for?' 'To ask him a question!' he says. 'Can't you ask it?' says I. 'No!' he says. And with that he drinks off his ale, and without another word, off he goes. He didn't come in again, Mr. Cranage. And—I thought I'd tell you all about it."

"Very good of you, Holroyd," I answered. "No doubt you concluded that when Jim the potman returned to Portsmouth last night he went straight to these people—whoever they are—who are so anxious to question me? Eh?"

"Well, that's just what I did conclude, Mr. Cranage," he replied. "And—I just thought I'd let you know. They might be people you didn't want to see—up yonder, at any rate."

"It's utterly immaterial to me, Holroyd, whether I see them—whoever they are, for I've no idea—up at Renardsmere House, or in your parlour, or in the street," I answered. "If you should have any strangers asking for me, here, send them up."

"Then—you know this Jim?" he asked, inquisitively.

"He once served me with a dinner—at a business place in Portsmouth," I replied, thinking it best to be candid. "But I haven't the glint of a notion as to what his conversation with you meant—that is, in particular, though I may have in general. But as I said—if anybody asks for me, send them up."

I left him at that and went away, wondering. Putting things together, I came to a conclusion. Holliment, doubtless, had utterly vanished from his place of business. Probably the police had found evidence of the assault on his premises—the ruined staircase, the burst-in door, and so on. They had made enquiries—Jim the potman had no doubt told them of the stranger he had seen there, and they were anxious to find that stranger and to question him about his relations with Holliment. Now Jim had accidentally discovered my whereabouts. Of course he would report it. Taking everything into consideration I decided that I might expect a visit from the police at any minute.

But the week-end passed and nothing happened. Then, on the Monday morning, Lady Renardsmere

suddenly took it into her head to go up to town, and, as usual, at a moment's notice.

Before leaving she gave me a message for Peggie Manson with respect to something or other that she wished done about Rippling Ruby, and about noon when I had finished my correspondence I walked across the valley to Manson Lodge, to deliver it. I met Peggie on the Downs, where some of her precious charges were just then at walking exercise. We stood watching them for some little time; when Bradgett had finally marshalled them off towards their stables, Peggie asked me to lunch with her, and we were strolling slowly in the direction of the house, chatting about Lady Renardsmere and her peculiarities, when round the corner of a cop-pice which lay between us and the village came three strange men, who, after one glance in our direction, bore straight down on me.

I had seen Peggie the day before, after church, and had told her of what Holroyd had told me about Jim the potman, and she had agreed that sooner or later I should have a visit from somebody. Here, undoubtedly, was the visit!—and she turned on me with a sharp exclamation.

“Detectives!”

Two of the three men no doubt were detectives. But it was only because of our knowledge of the affair that we took them to be detectives. Judged by merely outward appearance they might have been anything—commercial travellers, highly re-

spectable tradesmen, military or naval men in mufti: there was no particular hand on them. 'One, a youngish fellow in a grey tweed suit, swinging a smart cane, looked rather of the professional cricketer type; another, a middle-aged man in a dark silk-faced overcoat and top hat, was a little more suggestive of his job, but both might have been taken for idlers enjoying a walk over the Downs; they looked innocent and innocuous enough as they crossed the close-cropped turf towards us. Still. . .

"Detectives!—sure as fate!" reiterated Peggie. "Be careful! And—the third man!"

Now that they were nearer it was at the third man that I was looking. The first and second were Englishmen, unmistakably. But this was a Chinaman. And, from what I had at various times seen of Chinamen in London, I took him to be a Chinese gentleman. He was very precisely and correctly attired in the latest fashion—I should say his clothes had come out of a Savile Row establishment; everything about him, from his silk hat to his shining boots, was of a fine elegance, and the hand that carried his neatly-rolled umbrella was newly gloved. I looked closely at his gold-spectacled countenance as the three men drew nearer, and I was at once certain of one thing—his was not the face that I had seen at Holliment's window.

The three uncovered and bowed politely as they came up to me, and the youngest of the three, looking enquiringly at me, smiled.

"Mr. Cranage, I believe?" he asked. "Mr. James Cranage? Just so—may we have a word or two with you, Mr. Cranage? We've come out from Portsmouth to get it!"

"If you'll tell me who you are, and why you want a word or two with me, certainly!" I answered.

"My name's Spiller, sir," he answered readily, and with another smile. "Detective Spiller, Portsmouth Police Force. This is Detective-Sergeant Jifferdene, of the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard—I daresay you've heard of him, Mr. Cranage. And this gentleman is Mr. Shen, of the Chinese Legation, in London."

"Very well, gentlemen," I said. "Do you want to see me in private, or——"

"We've nothing whatever to ask you that the lady can't hear, Mr. Cranage," replied Spiller, with a polite bow in Peggie's direction. "Nothing!—if she cares to listen."

"All we want, Mr. Cranage," added Jifferdene, with a comprehensive glance that took in both of us, "is a little information about certain doings on a certain date—at Portsmouth."

"Yes?" I said. "Well?"

The two detectives glanced at each other: Jifferdene nodded to Spiller.

"Well, it's this, Mr. Cranage," began Spiller. "You needn't be in the least alarmed by our coming here, nor about answering our questions—we don't want you, sir, and we know nothing against you—

we want information, and if I were you, I should give it. Now, rather more than a fortnight ago, did you spend the better part of a day at Holliment's shop—a general dealer's place and coal office—in Portsmouth?"

"I did indeed!" said I.

"The potman from the Admiral Hawke brought your dinner there?" he suggested.

"He did!" I answered.

"And your tea, I believe?" he went on. "Now, Mr. Cranage, will you just tell me how you came to be there at all, and exactly what happened while you were there?"

I looked at Peggie. She was quick to interpret the meaning of that look, and just as quick to answer.

"I should tell them everything!" she said.

"Good advice, miss!" exclaimed Spiller. "Mr. Cranage couldn't do better."

"It will take some little time," I remarked. "A good deal happened. However. . ."

Standing there on the Downs, with Portsmouth itself showing ghost-like and hazy in the far distance, I told these three the whole story, from the moment of my meeting Quaterwayne on the Clarence Pier to that wherein I woke up at the point of Miss Manson's hunting-crop. The two detectives occasionally made notes in their pocket-books; Mr. Shen listened with true Oriental inscrutableness; now and then I looked at him, but his face remained gravely

polite and utterly unreadable. And at last the story came to its end, and the detectives put away their memoranda.

"And you never heard Holliment give any reason for all this, Mr. Cranage?" asked Spiller.

"No definite reason—no!" I replied.

"But he seemed to be desperately frightened, eh?"

"He was certainly about as badly frightened as a man can be."

"Lest the Chinaman whose face you saw at the window should get in?"

"I suppose so. But then, he was frightened long before that. He became mortally frightened as soon as ever he got Quattervayne's note."

"Well, you were with him a fair lot, Mr. Cranage! Didn't he drop anything that gave you an idea as to the causes of his fright?"

"No!—nothing whatever. I made out—got a notion you know—that for some reason or other the Chinaman who had looked in at the window wanted to get at him and I suppose at Quattervayne. But he didn't tell me why."

The two detectives exchanged a whisper or two; then Jifferdene spoke to Mr. Shen. And Mr. Shen turned to me.

"You are quite sure that the face you saw at the window was that of a Chinaman?" he asked in perfect English and a soft, gentle voice.

"I'm quite sure of that!" I answered promptly. "Quite sure!"

"You are familiar with the physiognomy?" he enquired with a smile.

"I have seen a great many of your countrymen in London," I replied. "Both in the West End and in the Limehouse district. Oh, yes!—he was a Chinaman. Besides, Holliment, all through our conversation, referred to him as a Chinaman."

"Do you think you could recognise him?" he asked.

"That I should hardly like to say," I answered. "I'm doubtful about it. You must remember that I only saw him for a second—through the window."

"And again, I think, when he and the other men broke into the staircase," he remarked.

"Yes," I agreed, "but that was in the light of street lamps and so in a poor light. I merely saw that it was a Chinaman who broke in, with others—not Chinamen—behind him."

"Holliment," he continued. "He did not refer to the Chinaman by name?—any particular name?"

"Oh, no—certainly not!" said I. "I heard no name."

Mr. Shen bowed as a sign that he had done with me, and I turned to the others. They asked a few questions about the wrecked car, and if we had heard any rumours about Holliment and Quartervayne having been seen in the neighbourhood on the morning of my being deposited in it, and when I had answered them they went away as unceremoniously as they had arrived.

"That's only made the mystery all the greater."

remarked Peggie as we turned towards the house. "There's some big business at the back of all that. Chinese Legation!—why should an official come down from there?—seems like a State affair."

"We shall hear more yet," I said.

But I heard no more for some days—heard no more of anything. Things went on quietly and as usual at Renardsmere House. Then, one morning, as I was writing letters, a footman came in with a card bearing the inscription Mr. Percy Neamore.

"Gentleman in the hall, sir—wishes to see her Ladyship, on most important business," he said.

It was my job to do the preliminary interviewing of callers of this sort. I picked up the card and went into the hall. There, looking inquisitively about him, stood an immaculately attired, very self-assured young Jew.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHEQUE FOR £10,000

THE hall door being open, I saw at a glance how Mr. Percy Neamore, whoever he was, had contrived to present himself at Renardsmere House so early in the morning: at the foot of the terrace steps stood a conveyance which I knew to have been hired from our nearest station—it was the only vehicle to be had there. Evidently, then, our visitor had come down from town by the first morning train—which seemed to argue that his business was urgent. I tried to size him up as I walked along the hall to him; he was, as I have said, immaculately attired, perhaps, a little over-dressed if anything, and full of complacent self-assurance—certainly a Jew, and with something about him that suggested either *money* or *diamonds*. His manners were good and he bowed and smiled politely as I drew near.

“You wish to see Lady Renardsmere—personally?” I enquired, glancing at the card which I held in my hand.

He bowed and smiled again—suavely.

“On business,” he answered. “Private business.”

"Lady Renardsmere is leaving for town in half-an-hour or so," I remarked. "I really don't know if she'll see anybody this morning. As a rule she sees no one—on business—without an appointment. I am her private secretary—can't you tell me what your business is?"

He gave me another suave but firm smile at that, and shook his very black, curly head.

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "Sorry, but my business is with no one but Lady Renardsmere."

"Does she know you?" I asked.

"Well—no!" he answered after a second's reflection. "But—may I have my card a minute?"

I gave the card to him, and he drew out a gold pencil-case and wrote something underneath his name.

"If Lady Renardsmere sees that," he said confidently—"she'll understand when she sees that."

Upon that I opened the door of a morning room near by, and asking him to be seated, went off to find Lady Renardsmere. She was just finishing breakfast, and had come down ready dressed for her journey to town. I gave her the card and explained that its presenter was awaiting her pleasure. I added that he wouldn't tell me what his business was.

"Neamore?" she said, glancing at the name. "Don't know him!" Then she looked at the pencilled words beneath, at which I myself had not troubled to look. Her tone altered. "Oh!" she continued.

“Just so! Very well—take him into my office, Cranage.”

The room which Lady Renardsmere called her office was a small apartment opening out of the hall. It was more like a man's den than a woman's boudoir and might have been taken for a tool-shed more easily than for either. There Lady Renardsmere kept her own gardening implements, her gardening garb and shoes, her guns, fishing-rods, and all sorts of out-door things; there, too, she had shelves full of books about racing and a set of *Ruff's Guide*; there also, was a big desk, stuffed with papers, chiefly relating to her stud and its doings; at that desk, whereat I presented myself every morning, she transacted all her business. Here I conducted Mr. Percy Neamore, and after digging a chair out of the accumulated confusion, bade him wait; a few minutes later, through the open door of my own office-room, close by, I saw Lady Renardsmere go to him.

The proceedings of the next half-hour were—for that house—remarkable. About ten minutes after Lady Renardsmere had joined her visitor, Neamore came out of the room, bareheaded, and looking eminently pleased with himself, and walking out of the front door to his conveyance paid its driver, who at once mounted his box and drove away. Then Neamore went back to Lady Renardsmere, and for the next quarter of an hour they were closely closeted. At the end of that time she came out and into my room.

"Cranage," she said, "give me my A account cheque-book—I may want it in town."

Since my arrival at Renardsmere House I had kept all its mistress's cheque books: she had several, all referring to different accounts, the one she now asked for related to what I considered her own private account. I got it out of the safe and handed it over; she put it away in her hand-bag, and merely remarking that she supposed she'd be home sometime during the evening or night, went back to her visitor. Ten minutes later her car came round to the front door, and presently she and Mr. Percy Neamore emerged from the sanctum and went out to it. Having a question to put to her before she left, I went out, too. To my astonishment Neamore had already entered the car and was making himself mighty comfortable in one of its luxurious corners; Lady Renardsmere, still on the terrace steps, was giving orders to her chauffeur.

"Go straight to the Ritz, Walker," she commanded. "This gentleman and I are lunching there. Get me there by one o'clock, sharp. After that you can take this car round to Park Lane, and I'll ring you up when I want you, later on."

A moment later the big car moved off, and I went back into the house considerably mystified. Who on earth was Mr. Percy Neamore that Lady Renardsmere should carry him off to town, and go to lunch with him at the Ritz? Until three-quarters of an hour previously he had been an absolute

stranger to her—why this sudden intimacy? Was it business?—and if so, what business? ‘I remembered Neamore’s card then, and his scribbling on it, and I went into Lady Renardsmere’s room to see if I could find it. There it lay on her desk, and I picked it up. But I got no information from what Neamore had written. What he had written, underneath his own name, seemed to be the name of some firm or other—Gildenbaum and Roskin. I knew nothing about them—but somehow, they seemed to fit in with what I had seen of Neamore.

Lady Renardsmere had not returned when I went to bed that night—which was pretty late—but she evidently came home during the small hours, for she was in her business room when I looked in at the usual time next morning. She went through her letters with me and gave me instructions about them; then, as I was leaving the room, she handed me the cheque-book which I had given her the day before. She made no reference to having made use of it, but later on, when I was about to put it back in the safe, I looked into it to see if she had drawn any cheque during her day in town. She had drawn one—there was the counterfoil. And according to that it had been a cheque for £10,000, payable to Percy Neamore.

I must here explain a peculiarity, or fad, or practice of Lady Renardsmere’s—whatever you like to call it. I have already said that she had several cheque-books, all relating to different accounts. It

was her strict rule whenever a cheque was paid out for anything, however large, however small the amount, to have particulars of the payment posted up *on the counterfoil*. Thus, if I paid Holroyd so much for his weekly account for hay, or straw, or horse-corn I had to enter up on the counterfoil the precise details; this practice was adhered to in the case of each cheque-book, and punctiliously observed by Lady Renardsmere herself as regards this private cheque-book which she had just restored to me. It was a rule which she never broke: that she was meticulously particular about sticking to. But she had broken it in this instance—there was nothing on the counterfoil to show why Lady Renardsmere had paid Mr. Percy Neamore ten thousand pounds.

I am neither more inquisitive nor less inquisitive than the average man—which means that I possess a fair share of proper and reasonable curiosity. I was curious about this Neamore transaction—I wanted to know about it. And taking advantage of my position, and of my knowledge of her method of doing things, I carried the cheque-book back to Lady Renardsmere and indicated the last counterfoil.

“No particulars have been entered up on this,” I said, in the most indifferent and casual tone I could affect, at the same time watching her narrowly. “There’s nothing but name and amount.”

For about the only time that I remember during my connection with her, Lady Renardsmere showed herself taken aback.

"Um—er—well, never mind it this time, Cranage," she said almost apologetically. "It—it's a little private transaction of my own."

"I drew your attention to it," I said, "because it's your strict rule to enter these particulars on counterfoils."

"I know—I know!" she answered hastily. "Quite right to point it out—that is my rule. But in this case—a private affair, as I said. Of course, I know what the cheque was paid for! All right, Cranage—you were quite right in drawing my attention to it."

So I got nothing out of that, and I was as wise as ever as to why she had paid Mr. Percy Neamore so large a sum. Perhaps, I thought, it was a betting transaction. I knew that Lady Renardsmere backed her fancy now and then, not only with regard to her own horses, but to those of other owners; I knew, too, that she was backing Rippling Ruby heavily to win the Derby. Possibly this ten thousand pounds was a sum placed in Neamore's hands to be laid out amongst various turf commission agents. Only one thing was certain about it, however—it had been paid, and Lady Renardsmere and Neamore were the only people who knew why. Yet—there seemed to be some mystery about the matter—Neamore's coming was mysterious—his going up to town with Lady Renardsmere was mysterious—it was odd, too, that she couldn't or wouldn't fill up that counterfoil.

However, there was more mystery at hand. I

used to lunch in my own sitting-room; just as I had finished that day and was slipping into an easy chair with my pipe and the newspaper, Lady Renardsmere sent for me. I found her in her office, and on the desk before her a small packet, neatly done up in stout notepaper and heavily sealed. By its side lay a letter, with a name and address sprawled all over the surface of the envelope in Lady Renardsmere's super-sized handwriting.

"Cranage," she said, "you've had lunch? Then I want you to do something for me. You see this letter and small parcel? I want you to take them yourself to my solicitor, Mr. Pennithwaite, in Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"This afternoon?" I asked.

"Just now," she answered. "You can have the Rolls-Royce—Walker's had his dinner, and he'll run you up to town by half-past four. Pennithwaite never leaves his office before five—you'll catch him easily. But Cranage—" here she paused, and in the excess of what, I could see, was a real anxiety, laid her hand on my arm as I stood by her—"Cranage!—promise me that you won't stop the car and leave it anywhere—anywhere at all, on the way!"

"Certainly, Lady Renardsmere!" I answered. "Why should I stop it?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she said. "Young men pull up, I suppose, to get a drink, or—that sort of thing. But you won't, will you, Cranage? You'll go straight from my door to Pennithwaite's?—you'll

take this parcel from my hand and this letter and think of nothing else until you've delivered them into his?"

"Of course, Lady Renardsmere!" I protested. "I'll do exactly what you ask. Give your orders to Walker—he's to go straight from here, without stop, to Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Yes," she said. "Very well—he'll be ready in ten minutes. Thank you, Cranage. And—where will you put these?"

I showed her. I put the parcel—a tiny, three-inch-square thing—in my trousers' pocket; the letter in a breast pocket.

"Shan't even touch them myself, Lady Renardsmere, till I hand them to Mr. Pennithwaite," I said. "Regard them as safe as—as safe can be."

"Good lad!" she replied, more cheerily. "I felt I could trust you. Well, now, when you've seen Pennithwaite, you'll be free. Get dinner somewhere—a good one—make your own arrangements with Walker about bringing you back—anything, as long as you've delivered parcel and letter. Here!—that'll pay for your dinner, my boy!"

Before I could protest or stop her she had thrust a five-pound note into my hand and left the room. I went to get ready for my journey; when I came down again she was at the hall door, giving strict orders to Walker.

"And after that you'll take your orders from Mr. Cranage as to coming back," she concluded.

"The present thing is—straight there without stop!"

I got into the car and we moved off, Lady Renardsmere giving me a sort of half-warning, half-admonitory look as I raised my hat to her. I knew what she meant, it was a reminder of what she had said to me in her room. And as we cleared the village and struck out for the London and Portsmouth road six miles away across country, I wondered why she was so anxious that there should be no break in my journey between Renardsmere House and Lincoln's Inn Fields. Those were not the days of highwaymen. But what was it that I was carrying to Mr. Pennithwaite? Evidently something of great value or importance, small as it was. Did she fear that I might be stopped—in broad daylight, on a pleasant Springtide afternoon? The idea seemed ridiculous—and yet, her anxiety had been real enough, so real indeed that it communicated itself to me in some degree, and my only concern was to get to town and discharge my commission as speedily as possible. And I had nothing to complain of in Walker's share of the business—striking into the London road at Petersfield, he bowled along that famous highway at a rare turn of speed, and eventually turned out of Kingsway into Lincoln's Inn Fields at precisely twenty-five minutes to five.

Mr. Pennithwaite's office (Pennithwaite, Mallaby and Pennithwaite) was on the south side of the Fields—one of those old houses which have survived the senseless craze of rebuilding and restoration,

and remain to show us how much more taste in architecture our great-grandfathers had than we have. And Mr. Pennithwaite was in, and received me in a great room with a beautifully moulded ceiling and a fine fireplace—he was the sort of man who would have looked out of place in any other surroundings, being himself of a solemn and old-fashioned type—and to him, having been assured that he was Mr. Pennithwaite, I delivered up letter and parcel. He read the letter in my presence; then, taking the parcel with him, he retired into an inner room. He remained there some little time; when he came back—having presumably left the parcel or its contents behind—he sat down at his desk, rapidly wrote something on a sheet of letter-paper, enclosed and sealed it, and handed it to me with a polite bow.

“Just to let Lady Renardsmere know that you have safely delivered letter and parcel,” he said, with a smirk. Then he inspected me more carefully. “Her ladyship’s new secretary, I think?” he added.

“Just so, Mr. Pennithwaite,” I answered.

He rose and offered me his hand.

“You’ll find her a very good mistress,” he said, “eccentric—but good-hearted. I wish you good day.”

I went out to Walker and the car, immensely relieved somehow, to have got rid of that mysterious little parcel. Walker and I arranged matters. He was to take the car round to Lady Renardsmere’s town house in Park Lane, get his tea there, and meet

me at a certain spot near Piccadilly Circus at precisely half-past-eight. He went off—and I strolled idly away, to enjoy a spell of liberty. I dawdled up the Strand, took a look round the Haymarket and Coventry Street, and finally, at just after six o'clock, turned into the Trocadero, bent on a good and leisurely dinner.

Early as it was the place was already pretty full, and during the next hour it became fuller—by seven the big room in which I was dining was not far from being packed. My long ride had made me hungry, however, and I paid little attention to the people near me. But as my appetite became satisfied, I began to look round and about, and suddenly, at the far end of the room, at a table set in a corner, but full in the light, I saw Neamore, and with him—Holliment!

There was no mistake on my part about it—there they were, dining together. The room was not so big, nor the distance so great, that I could not see them clearly. They had a big bottle of champagne between them, and they were eating and drinking voraciously. But also they were in close and earnest conversation, so close that they gave no attention to anything or anybody outside themselves. Holliment!—with Neamore, to whom Lady Renardsmere had paid ten thousand pounds the day before! For what?

For the half of a second I thought of going up to Holliment and accosting him. But the impulse

passed as quickly as it had arisen. No!—I had accidentally discovered enough for that time. Holliment was in London, and he knew Neamore. I should hear more of both, yet. And lest he should see me, or Neamore should, as soon as I had finished my dinner I paid my bill, left the place by the nearest door, and went elsewhere for coffee and a cigar. It seemed to me that at that juncture it was best that neither of these men should set eyes on me.

I met Walker and the car half way down Lower Regent Street at half-past-eight, and we shook off London and went home. Lady Renardsmere was still up when we arrived, and though she said little I could see that she was relieved and pleased when I gave her the solicitor's note. But she said nothing about the nature of my errand, nor did I tell her what I had seen at the Trocadero. I was still thinking about that matter next morning, when, about eleven o'clock, I was fetched out into the hall to see somebody, who, said the footman, declared he must have speech with me immediately.

The somebody was Detective Spiller, from Portsmouth. He came close up, whispering.

"Mr. Cranage, you'll have to come with me!" he said. "Up to town, at once!—I've got a car outside. You haven't heard anything, of course. Well, that man Holliment!—you know? He was found in the West End early this morning, dead!—Murdered!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST MURDER

I WAS so taken aback by this curt announcement that for the moment I could do nothing but stand and stare at its maker, conscious that the footman who had fetched me out, and the butler, who had just come into the hall, were, in their turn, staring at me. But suddenly I found my tongue.

"Holliment? Murdered!" I exclaimed. "Impossible! Why, I saw him, myself, only last night!"

"No impossibility about it, Mr. Cranage," returned Spiller, coolly. "Plenty of time in which to get murdered between last night and this morning. But look here!"

He pulled out a telegram and opening it handed it to me. I confess that my hand shook as I took it from him—already my imagination was at work, and I saw Holliment being slowly and surely tracked down. . . .

"That's from Jifferdene—the man who was with me and the Chinese gentleman the other day," said Spiller. "Read it!"

I read:

"Man confidently believed to be Holliment found murdered in West End early this morning get Cranage and bring up here quickly as possible urgent."

"Yes," I said, "but he only says—confidently believed. It might be. However—I suppose I must go with you. Yet—why? There are others—must be—who can identify Holliment as well as I can. Portsmouth people—lots."

"There's nobody in Portsmouth who knows what you know, Mr. Cranage—about his last days there," replied the detective. "Come on—let's be off! I've got a good car outside—we'll go straight there by road."

"Come out on the terrace," I said, leading him to the door, out of earshot of the already curious servants. "Look here!" I went on. "What excuse shall I make to Lady Renardsmere? I don't want to tell her I'm mixed up in a murder business—at any rate not until I know more about it."

Spiller nodded and considered matters.

"Tell her a friend—or acquaintance—of yours has met with a very serious accident in London and your presence is needed," he said. "Ask her for a couple of days' leave—you may have to stay the night. That'll do, surely? Those fellows in there don't know me—nobody knows me hereabouts. You can explain things to her afterwards—if it's necessary."

I went off to find Lady Renardsmere in the garden. Much to my relief she gave me leave immediately without asking any questions whatever—she even offered me the services of Walker and a fast car. I explained that the man who had come to fetch me had a car at the door, and in a few minutes Spiller and I were off.

“Pretty hot business this, Mr. Cranage,” observed the detective when we were fairly away. “So far it’s beyond me! What do you make of it?”

“I!” I exclaimed. “Good Heavens, man, I know nothing of it beyond what I told you! I should think you—and that chap from Scotland Yard—what do you call him?—Jifferdene?—you’re the men to know things about it!”

“Aye, well,” he remarked with a dry laugh. “I can assure you we know next to nothing. That Chinese gentleman who came with us to see you—if anybody knows anything, he does. But those Easterns!—Lord, you might as well try to get butter out of a dog’s mouth as news out of them, if they don’t want to give it!”

“How did he come to be with you, anyway?” I enquired. “I’ve wondered a good deal about that.”

“I’ll tell you,” he answered. “He turned up, with Jifferdene, at our headquarters at Portsmouth a few days before we saw you on those Downs. He wanted to get news of some Chinaman, a Chinaman, who, he said, was believed to have been in Portsmouth of late and whom the Chinese Legation were very

anxious to lay hands on. I was told off to make enquiries. Eventually—really within twenty-four hours, I found that a Chinaman, evidently a respectable man, had been seen once or twice in company with Holliment. We went to Holliment's place and found there'd been strange doings there and that Holliment had vanished. Then we made enquiries round about, and that potman at the Admiral Hawke told us about a strange young gentleman who'd been at Holliment's place all one day. Two or three days later he came to us and said he'd found that young gentleman—you—and told us where you were. So we came up to Renardsmere—and heard from you about the Chinaman who looked in at Holliment's window, and afterwards broke in with other fellows. See?"

"And is that all you know?" I asked.

"All I know up to now," he replied. "Mr. Shen went off with that much news, and Jifferdene with him. I've heard nothing more until I got this wire."

"Then it really comes to this," said I. "What you three were after was not Holliment, but some Chinaman?"

"That's about it," he answered. "A Chinaman! I tell you—the Chinese Legation want him—whoever he is—pretty badly, so much so that they set Scotland Yard to find him. But why they want him, and who he is, and what Holliment has or had to do with it, I've no more notion than an unborn baby!"

"Spiller!" I said. "I'll lay you anything you like that if it's Holliment that's murdered it was that Chinaman murdered him!"

"I should say that's a certainty," he remarked with a laugh. "You'd be safe in laying a million to one! But—what object?"

"I don't know," I answered. "All I know is that I never saw a man in such absolute thorough fear as Holliment was in when I told him I'd seen that chap's yellow face and slant eyes at the window! He was in deadly fear of his life, Spiller—his life!"

"Well, the chap's got him!" he said. "You'll find it'll be Holliment. But Jifferdene will know more by the time we get up."

We found Jifferdene awaiting us when we got to Scotland Yard. He took us to a little waiting-room and closed the door on the three of us. And by that time, having debated on it with myself in the intervals of my conversation with Spiller in coming along, I had made up my mind not to mention Neamore in connection with Holliment—yet, at any rate. For if I mentioned Neamore, I should have to mention Lady Renardsmere, and I didn't want to. And after all, Neamore might have nothing to do with this business—Holliment, doubtless, knew plenty of men in London.

"I don't think there's any doubt that this man is Holliment—from the description I had of him in Portsmouth," remarked Jifferdene, when he'd shut the door. "I should say there's no doubt about it."

"Mr. Cranage saw him last night," observed Spiller with a nod at me.

"Oh?" said Jifferdene. "Where was that?"

"At the Trocadero—getting his dinner," said I. "That was about seven o'clock."

"Did you speak to him?" he asked.

"I didn't!—I didn't want to. After my recent adventures with Holliment," I went on, "I didn't want to have anything more to do with him. He didn't see me—and I left the place."

"Well," said Jifferdene, "I want you to identify him, anyway, Mr. Cranage. Yes—I know there are plenty of other people who could do that, but there are particular reasons why you should do it, and why you should be here to help me at this point. You're the only person I know of who saw the Chinaman—who—in my opinion, is the murderer."

"Where did it happen?" enquired Spiller.

"Up Paddington way," replied Jifferdene. "If you know Maida Vale, you'll know that there's a stretch of the Regent's Canal runs between Edgeware Road and Warwick Crescent. The roadway on one side is called Blomfield Road; on the other Maida Hill West. He was found lying by the canal wall in Blomfield Road, about twenty yards from the bridge that connects Warwick Avenue with Harrow Road. That was at three o'clock this morning—a policeman found him. He'd been dead half-an-hour or so, according to the police surgeon. Knifed!—and the man who knifed him knew where to strike,

too! But the object? That's a puzzle! Every pocket in his clothing had been turned out; some of his effects, watch, money, and so on were found aside on the path as of no consequence; his coat and waistcoat had been ripped up here and there—it's very evident the murderer had been looking for something. But whether he got it or not—who knows?"

"No clue, of course?" suggested Spiller.

"None! Not a scrap of a clue," said Jifferdene. "Of course, the police are making extensive enquiries round about, to see if they can hear of his having been seen round that quarter late last night, and in whose company, but up to now, I've heard nothing."

"Where is he?" asked Spiller.

"Paddington Mortuary. We'll go there, and get Mr. Cranage to identify him," replied Jifferdene. "I forgot to say there were no papers of any sort on him. Perhaps the murderer carried them off—if he had any. Might have had a pocketbook, of course. However, we'll go. But you've had a longish ride, and it's past one. What do you say to a bit of lunch first?"

We went round to a restaurant in Parliament Street, and I was speedily made aware that their professional duties, however gruesome they might be occasionally, made no difference to my companions' appetites. They ate and drank heartily—so I followed their example, putting away from my thoughts all anticipations of the unpleasant task

before me. And to do them justice they talked no shop over their lunch—instead we talked of racing, and I advised them to put their last sixpence on Rippling Ruby, of whom, from personal acquaintance, I gave them a glowing account. We got on very well together—and at last we paid our bills, went out again into the bright Spring afternoon and set off in a taxi-cab to Paddington—to get it over.

“One good look’ll do, Mr. Cranage,” whispered Jifferdene, as we walked into the Mortuary.

“No need to hang about!—you’ll know if it’s the man or not. Now then . . .”

That was Holliment. He was very still, and very white, and very awful. . . .

“That’s he!” I whispered. “Good Heavens!—and last night . . .”

We went out again. We walked across Paddington Green in silence.

“Where it happened,” observed Jifferdene, suddenly, “is only about five minutes walk from here—up behind those flats. But I don’t know that it’s worth while going to look—nothing to see, of course, but the mere spot. And there’s more to do yet, Mr. Cranage. I want you to go with me now, to see a Chinese gentleman who’s staying at the Langham Hotel, and then to-night I want to take you down Limehouse way.”

“I suppose I’m in your hands,” I assented.

“Well, we’ll get it through as quickly as we can,

as far as you're concerned," he said. "As for you, Spiller, you'd better get back to Portsmouth and go on with those enquiries there—find out more about Holliment and that Chinaman—there must be more to get at. Look here!" he drew Spiller aside and for a few minutes talked earnestly with him. "Get at that, if you can," he concluded, "and, of course, keep me posted."

Spiller said good day to me, and went off to catch a train home; Jifferdene, after we had walked a little further, hailed a taxi-cab, and bade its driver go to the Langham Hotel. He turned to me confidentially when we had set off.

"This is one of the queerest cases I've ever been engaged in, Mr. Cranage," he said. "It's all the queerer because of these Orientals being mixed up in it. Spiller tells me he's told you all he knows; well, it's a fact that I know very little more! But I've got an idea. Spiller told you, didn't he, that it was the Chinese Legation who set me on to the track of this Chinaman who was certainly known to Holliment in Portsmouth? They did—but there's somebody behind the Chinese Legation, and that somebody, in my opinion, is an old Chinese gentleman—some big pot in his own country, I think—who's now staying at the Langham. I've seen him once, in company with Mr. Shen, and you and I'll go and see him again now. He knows what it's all about. But I'm damned if I do!"

"But if this old gentleman really knows what it's

all about," I said, "can't you, in view of the present state of things, get him to tell? Can't you make him tell? Seeing that it's got to murder——"

"Aye, but these Easterns don't seem to attach so much importance to human life as we do, Mr. Cranage!" he answered. "And as to persuading him to speak, or making him speak—well, you wait till you see him! I haven't seen her myself, but it's my belief that the Sphinx would look as likely to sing the last music-hall ditty as this old atomy is to tell anything if he doesn't want to!"

"And who is he?" I asked. "You say some big pot in his own country. What's he doing here? And does he speak English?"

"He speaks English quite well—as well as that Mr. Shen does, and that's good enough—been at one of our universities has Mr. Shen, I understand," he replied. "As to what the old gentleman's doing here, I don't know, but I fancy, from what bit I've seen that he's some big commercial magnate. He's got a suite of rooms at the Langham, and some of our leading financiers go there to see him. What his precise rank, state, and so on may be, I don't know—I know him, and they know him at the Langham as Mr. Cheng."

"Mr. Cheng—I'll remember," said I. "And—how far is Mr. Cheng acquainted with the details of this case?"

"As far as that Holliment knew a certain Chinaman in Portsmouth recently, and that you, when in

charge of Holliment's shop saw a Chinaman look in at the window, that Holliment was frightened to death on hearing of that, and that later a Chinaman followed by a gang of roughs, broke in, whereupon Holliment fled. That," said Jifferdene, "is what Mr. Cheng knows up to now. And now I'm going to tell him that Holliment has been murdered."

"To see if it will make him speak, eh?" I suggested.

"Well, perhaps that's in my mind," he admitted. "But—he won't speak unless he wants to. I only wish I could get at what's behind his old parchment face!"

Just then we pulled up at the Langham, and presently Jifferdene sent up his card to Mr. Cheng. We were not kept waiting very long—within a few minutes a young Chinaman in English dress appeared, greeted the detective politely, and taking us upstairs ushered us into one of a fine suite of rooms and begging us to be seated remarked that Mr. Cheng would see us personally before long. Then he disappeared and we waited—five, ten minutes. A door opened, a distinguished-looking man came out, crossed the room and left it by the door at which we had entered. Jifferdene bent towards me.

"Know that man, Mr. Cranage?" he asked.

"I? No!" I replied. "Who is he?"

"Lord Mickleborough—chairman of the Oriental Development Company—one of the biggest financial pots in the City!" he answered. "His firm——"

He suddenly interrupted himself, twisting sharply

in his chair and then rising quickly to his feet at a slight, almost imperceptible sound behind us. I turned and rose too—there, framed in the doorway which Lord Mickleborough had just left, stood a venerable Chinaman, clad in his native dress. He made a striking and picturesque figure, but it was neither the colour nor the unusualness of it that struck me so much as the apparent great age of the slightly bowed form and the parchment-hued, deeply seamed face about it. He looked to be at least a hundred years old, and I found myself bowing to him as if in reverence. He bowed back, smiling a little, and I saw then that his eyes were as alert and as bright as those of a young man.

“Please to walk in.”

The voice, gentle, low, was yet clear and firm. We followed him into an inner room; he pointed to two chairs, drew another up exactly in front of us, sat down, folded his hands in his sleeves and looked at Jifferdene.

“You have news for me?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Cheng, yes, sir,” answered Jifferdene. “That man Holliment, of whom I have told you before, has been murdered.”

There was not so much as the flicker of an eyelid in the queer, wrinkled old face before us: Jifferdene might have been remarking on the beauty of the weather.

“Where was this? In Portsmouth—or in London?” enquired Mr. Cheng.

"London, sir, this morning, about half-past two or three o'clock, knifed, Mr. Cheng—stabbed to death. But not for robbery, sir—his money and valuables lay on the path at his side," said Jifferdene. "His pockets had all been turned out, and a good deal of his clothing ripped up, as if the murderer had been searching for something."

Still there was not a sign on that immobile countenance. But the eyes were alert, watchful, keen.

"Have you any clue to the murderer?"

"None, sir, so far! But I want to suggest something to you, Mr. Cheng. In my opinion the murderer is that Chinaman who looked in at Holliment's window, and who is probably the man you want to find."

Mr. Cheng bowed his head.

"It may be so," he said.

Jifferdene indicated my presence.

"This is the young gentleman who saw that Chinaman's face at the window," he remarked.

Mr. Cheng looked at me. For some reason or other his venerable countenance grew bland.

"But the young gentleman could not positively recognise the man again, I think?" he said.

"No!" admitted Jifferdene. "So he says. All the same, Mr. Cheng, we're going to try for that man!"

"By what means?" enquired Mr. Cheng.

"Well—there's the Chinese quarter, sir," replied Jifferdene. "I'll begin with that. And Mr. Cheng!

—I know you're anxious to trace and find some particular countryman of yours. Can't you give me some little help, sir—a little description, now?"

Mr. Cheng remained motionless for a full minute. Then he leaned nearer.

"The man I want," he said quietly, "has lost the lower half of his left ear!"

CHAPTER IX

THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR

I STARTED to my feet with a sudden, sharp exclamation. Jifferdene stared at me—wonderingly.

But the astute old Chinaman smiled. He gave the detective a knowing look, at the same time nodding his head sidewise in my direction.

“The young gentleman’s memory is stirred!” he said in his quiet, even tones. “He—remembers!”

“Yes!” I said. “I do remember now!—now that you recall it. I couldn’t have said, positively, that the man was disfigured in the way you mention, but I do remember that in the mere glimpse I had of him I noticed that there was some disfigurement of the left side of his face—a scar—something!”

“The lower half of his left ear,” repeated Mr. Cheng. “A sword cut.”

Jifferdene who had listened intently to this, sighed. Whether it was a sigh of relief, or of perplexity, I could not tell.

“Well!” he said. “That seems to narrow things! A Chinaman who has lost the lower half of his left ear, eh? There are not so many of your countrymen in London as all that, Mr. Cheng! But now, sir, if

you'd only give me a little more information? The man's name, now?"

But Mr. Cheng's face became more Sphinx-like than ever.

"By this time," he answered, "he will have another name."

"No doubt," assented Jifferdene. "Still—however, there's a more important question. Why do you want him, Mr. Cheng?"

Mr. Cheng blinked at us.

"The first thing," he said amiably, "is to find him."

Jifferdene realised that he was up against a wall through which there was no passing, and over which it was hopeless to attempt to climb. He folded his hands over his waistcoat and twiddled his thumbs, looking steadily at the old Chinaman.

"I thought of combing out the Chinese quarter—Limehouse way," he suggested.

"You will not find him there," said Mr. Cheng. "All the haunts of my countrymen in London have been thoroughly searched—by ourselves."

"Where is he, then?" asked Jifferdene, almost despairingly.

"Probably sheltered by some countryman or countrymen of yours," replied the old man. "I think he will have accomplices. It may have been an accomplice—not necessarily himself—who murdered the man Holliment."

"If only I knew what Holliment had been murdered for!" muttered Jifferdene. "Not mere ordi-

nary robbery—that's flat. Holliment had a gold watch on him that was well worth fifty pound! It was flung on the pavement beside his body. And money—he'd a lot of money—that was lying about, too. What did the murderer want?"

Mr. Cheng smiled more blandly than ever.

"It is a more interesting question—did he find what he wanted?" he said in his gentlest tones.

"Suppose he didn't, Mr. Cheng?" suggested Jifferdene.

"In that case," murmured the old man, "there will be another murder—perhaps two—perhaps three."

Jifferdene stared at him: Mr. Cheng returned the stare steadily. The detective rose from his chair.

"I think we'd better get busy," he said. "Come on, Mr. Cranage—much obliged to you, Mr. Cheng. I wish, though, you'd give us more information."

The old man said nothing. He walked in front of us to the outer door of his suite, and opening it stood aside with a polite bow. But as I was about to pass out, he suddenly laid a claw-like hand on my arm.

"You are very young," he said. "Have a care of yourself!"

"Am I in danger, sir?" I asked.

"You were on one side of the window," he answered with a quick, meaning glance. "There was a man on the other who—will stop at nothing."

Then he bowed us out, closed the door on us, and we went downstairs and out into the street.

"Look here, Jifferdene!" I said, as soon as we were in the sunlight. "I've had enough of this, and I hope you've done with me. There's too much murder and suggestion of murder in the air! I shall be glad to go home."

"You'd only have to come up again, to-morrow, or the day after, Mr. Cranage," he replied, coolly.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Inquest—on Holliment," he answered laconically.

"What have I got to do with the inquest?" I asked.

"You'll be one of the most important witnesses," he replied. "You'll have to tell all about that affair at Portsmouth. So you'll have to stay—a day or two, anyway. But don't you be afraid—I'll keep you company during the day, and it's not likely that any harm'll come to you in a good hotel at night."

"It's a confounded nuisance!" I exclaimed. "What did that old Chinaman mean by his last words?"

"I think he meant that this chap who's lost part of his ear is after something which Holliment had in his possession, and that he—or his accomplices—will go through everybody and anybody who had any connection with Holliment in their efforts to find it," he answered, drily. "That's about it!"

"Then I am in some danger?" I said. "Of course, he knew of my connection, temporary though it was, with Holliment!"

"Don't be afraid!" he answered. "I'll see to you."

You're safer here with me, and in London, than you were down there at Renardsmere House. Put it out of your mind, Mr. Cranage, and we'll just drive round to Paddington Police Station, and hear any news about last night's affair—they ought to have some, there, by this time."

So we went back to Paddington, and there, at the Police Station, immediately encountered a man who appeared unfeignedly glad to see my companion.

"I was just going to telephone to you," he said. "I've got some information about that murdered man of whose identity we aren't sure."

"You needn't be uncertain any longer," remarked Jifferdene. "I've had him identified—by this gentleman. He's the man I said he was—Holliment, of Portsmouth. What information have you got about him?"

"Well, we've been making enquiries in that Maida Vale district all day," said the other, "and this afternoon I struck on something. A man answering his description was in the Warrington Hotel late last night with another man. I'm just going round there to get more news about it—you'd better come."

"As long as there's anything to learn—" began Jifferdene.

"There'll be something to learn. As soon as I heard of it, I sent a man to get the landlord to go round to the mortuary to see if he recognised the body as that of the man who had been in there last

night. He'll be back at the hotel by now, and what I want to get at is not so much particulars about him—the dead 'un—as about the man who was with him," said the Paddington detective. "That's a thing to follow up at once."

"Come on, then," assented Jifferdene. "Come on, Mr. Cranage—you're fairly in for it, now—may as well see it through. 'Tisn't as good fun as fox-hunting, maybe," he added, as we went out and got into the taxi-cab again, "but there is excitement in it, you know."

I was beginning to feel that there was, by that time. Man-hunting!—hunting a man, who, after all, was just one amongst seven millions!

"I suppose you've got to put two and two together, in these cases?" I said as we rode off once more. "Sort of mathematical problem, eh?"

"Aye, or a jig-saw puzzle!" remarked Jifferdene, with a wink at the other man. "And sometimes it's a job to fit the pieces, isn't it, Birkem?"

"I believe you," said Birkem. "Looks like it in this case, too. What was this chap knifed for? Not for what he had on him, anyway!"

"Ah!" remarked Jifferdene. "Lot o' guess things in this world. However, it'll be something to find out anything. Hope this landlord's blessed with a memory."

"Well, there's memories and memories," observed Birkem. "Give me a plain, uncoloured one! What I object to is when they start mixing up their memo-

ries with their imaginations. But I know this man a bit—he'll tell us a straightforward tale."

"Practical man, eh?" suggested Jifferdene.

"Very!" assented Birkem. "He'll tell us just what he saw, and just what he heard—and no more."

The landlord in question evidently expected a visit from the police, and as soon as we arrived ushered us into a private parlour and sat down with us. He himself plunged straight into the subject that had brought us there.

"Well," he said, folding his hands on the table before him, and looking round at us, "I've been along there—to the mortuary."

"Well?" asked Birkem.

"That's the man who was in here last night!"

"You're certain?"

"Dead certain! He came in here—into our saloon bar, that is—about half-past ten, and was here until nearly closing time."

"He'd another man with him, hadn't he?" suggested Birkem.

"He had. A younger man—very well dressed, quite a swell as regards his clothes. A Jew!"

It was all I could do to repress a start. That, I had no doubt, was Neamore. Neamore, of course. But I was not going to speak—yet.

"Had you ever seen either of them before?" asked Jifferdene.

"Never! That's perhaps why I noticed them particularly. I happened to be serving, myself, at that

part of the counter they came to when they entered, and I took stock of both. There was another reason why they attracted my attention—they asked for a bottle of champagne.”

“And got it, of course,” said Birkem.

“Of course!—and one of the best brands, too. They drank that at the counter, taking their time over it. I heard what they were talking about.”

“What?” asked Jifferdene.

“The chances of that filly of Lady Renardsmere’s—Rippling Ruby—for the Derby,” answered the landlord. “The younger man seemed to have some inside knowledge about it.”

“Well?” said Jifferdene, after a pause. “And what then?”

“They finished their bottle. Then the elder man—the man I’ve just seen,” continued the landlord with a significant nod—“he glanced at his watch. ‘Lots o’ time yet,’ he said. ‘We’ll have another.’ So they ordered another bottle of the same, and when I’d opened it for ’em they took it and their glasses across to an alcove in the saloon, and sat down.”

“Were they sober?” enquired Birkem.

“Sober and quiet and as well behaved as you please,” affirmed the landlord, confidently. “Very well conducted, polite men. I took ’em for a couple of bookmakers—something connected with the Turf, anyway.”

“And they stopped in your place some time—talking?” asked Jifferdene.

"Until within ten minutes of closing time—chatting quietly over their wine. Then they lighted cigars, and as they were going out the younger one came up to me at the counter and asked me if I could tell them where Delaware Road was? I went out to the door with them and pointed the way—it's not far off. They said good-night and went in that direction."

"Together?" asked Jifferdene.

"Together!" said the landlord.

We presently went away and walked along Warrington Crescent in quest of Delaware Road, which proved to be only a street or two off. It was an eminently respectable-looking thoroughfare, of the type peculiar to that district—solid, stucco-faced little villas set in small stone-wall-enclosed gardens: nothing in its outward appearance suggested crime of the murderous sort. Yet, as Jifferdene pointed out, here those two men had come, very late at night, and, not three minutes' walk away, down by the canal, one of them had been done to death some two hours afterwards.

"You'll have to make some searching investigations hereabouts, Birkem," he remarked, as we stood at a corner, looking about us. "Holliment and that other man came here to see—somebody! Who?"

Birkem took a speculative, discriminating glance on all sides of him.

"There aren't so many houses in this road," he observed. "And every one of 'em looks as if folk

with bank balances and morocco-bound prayer-books lives in 'em! Highly respectable, I call it. I can get the names and so on of every resident out of the Directory and I can call at every door. But if they did call on somebody here, that somebody's not very likely to say so!"

"You'll have to try your luck," said Jifferdene. "That landlord said these two were talking about the Turf. Find out, to start with, if anybody connected with horse-racing, or a betting business, lives in this road—you might get a clue there, if there does. Any bit of news of that sort—what's the matter, Mr. Cranage?"

For I had suddenly let out a shout of startled surprise, and was following it up by gesticulations which doubtless made my companions think I had gone mad. A taxi-cab running at a high rate of speed, had come round the corner, and was now making swiftly for Edgeware Road, along Warrington Crescent—so swiftly indeed that already the number plate at its rear was a blur of figures. But as it passed me I had just managed to recognise its occupant—Quartermayne!

"That cab!" I exclaimed. "Quartermayne's in it! Quartermayne!—the man who sent me to Holliment! Quick—can't we follow it?"

"As there isn't another taxi anywhere in sight, we can't," said Jifferdene. "But are you certain?"

"Dead certain!" I assented excitedly. "I saw

him plainly. Quatertervayne, as sure as I'm alive! If only we could have stopped him!"

"Aye—that might have been a help," he replied, shaking his head. "But he's out of sight now! Um!—now supposing he was the man they came to see here last night. As we've or you've seen him hereabouts maybe he's living here. Look here! give Birkem a full description of him."

I gave Birkem as accurate a description of Quatertervayne as I could, and as I remembered him on the Clarence Pier at Portsmouth, and that done Jifferdene and I left him and went away. And for a moment I was half-tempted to tell my companion about Neamore, for I was sure that it was Neamore who had been with Holliment at the Warrington Hotel on the previous night and had gone with him to Delaware Road. But I thought better—or it may have been worse—of that, determining to say nothing until I had seen Lady Renardsmere, or until something further had developed. I was sorely puzzled—Holliment, Quatertervayne, Neamore, Lady Renardsmere made a queer combination. . . .

"Look here!" said Jifferdene, suddenly breaking in on my thought, "the afternoon's not yet over. We'll just go to the Chinese Legation in Portland Place—I want to have a word with that Mr. Shen who came with us to see you. If that old Sphinx at the Langham won't tell me anything, perhaps Mr. Shen will, in view of Holliment's murder."

We went to Portland Place. Mr. Shen received

us. He was bland, suave, courteous, interested, and absolutely inscrutable. He agreed with Jifferdene that Holliment had doubtless been knifed, by the Chinaman whose face I had seen at the window, and who was undoubtedly the man that Mr. Cheng wanted to find. But having agreed, he said no more.

"Now, Mr. Shen," said Jifferdene, wheedlingly, "can't you tell me what it's all about? Why does Mr. Cheng want to find this chap?—whose name he won't give us."

Mr. Shen's smooth tones grew silkier than ever.

"The thing," he said, "is to find him."

Jifferdene spread out his hands.

"Just so!" he agreed. "But let me ask you—you've got means that we haven't. Have you tried to find him—in the quarters where your countrymen congregate in London—Limehouse, and so on? You have?—well, have you had a trace of him?"

"No!" answered Mr. Shen, promptly enough. "No trace! Not a word! And—he is a man who is disfigured—good to identify."

"Then where the devil is he!" exclaimed Jifferdene. "A Chinaman!—with half his left ear gone!—and as elusive as—"

"I think," interrupted Mr. Shen, quietly, "he is being carefully sheltered, hidden, by English accomplices."

"He was out last night, anyway, I'll bet!" muttered Jifferdene. "Lay a million to one it was he who knifed Holliment!"

"Yes," assented Mr. Shen. He smiled blandly through his spectacles. "I think he will knife somebody else yet. Then perhaps you will catch him."

Jifferdene stared at him and got up.

"Is Mr. Cheng going to tell *me* why he wants this man caught?" he asked. "Better still, though—do you know, yourself, Mr. Shen? Come, now!"

"Um!" said Mr. Shen. "Good-bye. You come and see me again some time, eh?"

We went off at that, and Jifferdene swore all the way down Portland Place. Perhaps it relieved his feeling; anyway he then turned his attention to me. After a little consultation, I decided to go to the Howard Hotel, in Norfolk Street, for the night, and for my own safety's sake to remain indoors after I had once crossed the threshold. Thither, on parting from Jifferdene, I repaired, dined leisurely, smoked, had a game of billiards or two with a fellow guest, and at eleven o'clock went to my room. I was just going to begin undressing when a hall-porter came up with a note, saying that its sender was waiting downstairs. The note was a roughly twisted scrap of paper, on which two words had been hastily scribbled in pencil: *Clarence Pier*.

I went straight downstairs. There, in a shadowy corner of the hall, stood Quartervayne.

CHAPTER X

QUARTERVAYNE

LATE as it was, there were several men standing about in the hall, and so that I might not attract their attention, I showed no surprise on seeing my unexpected visitor but went straight up to him and held out a hand (unwillingly enough in real truth!) as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to see him there. He gave me an almost convulsive pressure in return; his own hand was hot and clammy, and I saw at once that he was excited and nervous.

"A word with you!" he whispered. "Somewhere quiet!"

I glanced into the smoking-room, near the open door of which we were standing. It was pretty full of men, but I saw a corner that was vacant, and leading Quatertervayne into the room I took him over to it.

"A drink!" he murmured, as we sat down. "A stiff 'un! Then—talk."

I summoned a waiter, and bade my visitor order what he liked. He wanted brandy—a certain good dose of it—and soda. When the waiter had gone to

get it, I turned to Quartervayne, resolved on knowing one thing there and then.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked.

"Saw you, in the Strand, with Jifferdene, of the Yard," he answered, with a wink and a nudge of my arm. "Know him—well enough! Smart fellow! And I just followed you till you came in here—and so dropped in, now. Wanted to see you—most particular."

The brandy and soda came, and he took a pull at it, sighed as it went down, and again turned to me lowering his voice.

"You'll have heard about Holliment?" he said.

"Have you?" I demanded.

"Everybody has—by now," he retorted. "It's in the evening papers."

I had not seen any evening newspaper, and said so. He pulled one out, and showed me a stop-press paragraph.

The man who was found murdered early this morning in Bloomfield road, Maida Vale, has been identified as one Roger Holliment, until recently a general dealer and coal merchant, of Portsmouth. There is as yet no clue to the murderer, but the police are prosecuting active enquiries in the neighbourhood of the murder.

"I reckon it was you who identified him?" he went on, with a sidelong glance at me. "I suspected

they'd get hold of you. Holliment, of course, right enough! No clue—perhaps? But I bet you and I know something—what?”

“What have you come here for, Mr. Quartervayne?” I demanded. “That’s what I want to know!”

“I’ll tell you!” he answered readily. “To do you a good turn! I brought you into this damned mess, my lad, and it’s my duty to get you out of it. That’s what I came here for! Your sake—and safety!”

I gave him a searching look, and I saw he was speaking truth. He nodded at me as if in confirmation.

“Fact!” he said. “Nothing else!”

“Well, that’s very kind of you, I’m sure, Mr. Quartervayne,” I answered. “But—what particular danger am I in?”

Before replying he pulled out a cigar-case, offered its contents to me, and when I declined on the plea of the lateness of the hour, picked out a cigar himself, and began to smoke. I noticed how his fingers trembled as he struck a match, and I could see that, big man though he was, he was greatly agitated. But another pull at his glass, and the first whiff or two of his cigar, seemed to steady him.

“Look you here, my lad!” he said, suddenly. “No use beating about the bush! We know who did Holliment in! That damned Chink! Sure as that I see you at this blessed minute! And he’ll do me in, and he’ll do you in—if we let him! The thing is—

clear out! I'm going—and if you're wise you'll go too."

"Go—where?" I asked.

"Anywhere—as long as it's out o' this!" he retorted. "Get blue water between him and you—for the present, at any rate. I'm going—first thing in the morning. Flushing, or Middleburg—I've pals at both places. You come along, too—you're a smart young fellow, and I'll see you're all right. Never mind about money—I've plenty—no end of it. You come—you can act as my clerk over there. I can carry on my business from Middleburg, or Flushing, or any o' them foreign places as well as from Portsmouth or London. Why stay here to get that bloody Chink's knife into your throat—sooner or later? I shan't—not me!"

"Mr. Quartermayne," said I. "I'll be obliged to you if you'll tell me in plain language why that Chinaman should want to run his knife into my throat—or into yours—or into poor Holliment's? And take your time, Mr. Quartermayne—we're safe enough here!"

"Why, there's some comfort in that!" he said, looking round him. "I've been on the jumps all day, even in broad daylight. But you tell me this first—how much have you told the police—what've you told that Scotland Yard fellow?"

"Just the plain truth about my own adventure in Portsmouth, Mr. Quartermayne, from my first meeting with you until I found myself, after being

drugged, on Chilverton Downs," I answered, giving him a keen look. "I could do no less."

"You couldn't!" he agreed. "But—what do they know?"

"Next to nothing," said I. "Except that there's a Chinaman lurking or hiding somewhere who's wanted for some reason or other by a wealthy countryman of his, and whom they suspect of having murdered Holliment."

"They've no clue to his whereabouts?" he asked.

"No—so far," I replied. "But have you?"

He spread out his hands with a grimace. Then, drinking off his brandy, he beckoned to the waiter, bade him replenish the glass, and turned to me with more assurance than he had hitherto displayed.

"I?" he said. "Good Lord, no! He's somewhere in London—as you may be certain, after last night's work! But you want to know the whys and wherefores of certain things. I'll tell you—you'll understand better. Wait a minute."

He waited until he had got his second drink, and had taken a stiff pull at it; then, edging himself nearer to me on the lounge on which we were sitting, he went on in a low, confidential tone.

"Holliment," he said. "Holliment, he had more than one business there in Portsmouth. There was that waste and general dealer's shop. Then, he'd the coal-agency, I was partner with him in that—nice business, too—paid well. And he'd a bit of a share with me in another concern—I'm a Turf commission

agent—bookmaker, you know—by profession, but I've had several irons in the fire. But Holliment, he'd another business, all belonging to himself. He kept—at least, it was managed for him—a lodging or boarding-house in Portsea. Cheap place, you understand, sort of temperance hotel. Poorer sort of small commercials used it—you know the style—bed and breakfast for three bob, and other prices according—that sort o' thing. Well—there was a Chinaman came there. This Chinaman!"

"Before you go further, Mr. Quartervayne," I said, interrupting him. "Will you tell me this—did you ever see the man?"

"Only once or twice—at a slight distance," he answered. "In the street—with Holliment."

"Could you say if he'd any disfigurement?" I asked. "A scar—marks of a wound—anything of that sort?"

"Couldn't say," he replied. "Never was close enough. He was a respectably dressed chap—European clothes, you know—better dressed than most of Holliment's customers at that place. But—a Chink!"

"Well?" I suggested. "And his name?"

"Called himself Mr. Chuh Sin," he answered. "Chuh Sin! Told Holliment he'd come down there to study life in a big British naval port. However, he was taken ill, and they had to call in the doctor. Doctor thought the fellow was going to develop smallpox and packed him off there and then to the

hospital. Now then, the man had been at the shanty of Holliment's four or five weeks, and he hadn't paid Holliment a penny!—always said he was expecting remittances. And as the doctor told Holliment that he believed it was going to be a bad case and the man would probably die, Holliment did a damned silly thing. He sold the chap's effects—books, some instruments, so on—to pay his bill. And then, all of a sudden, the fellow turned up! It had all been a false alarm about the smallpox; he was all right, and the hospital folk bundled him out. I heard about it from one of the staff, early one morning—that this Chinaman had been discharged—and I made tracks, I can tell you! That was when I came across you."

I turned and gave him a long and steady look.

"Are you telling me seriously, Mr. Quartervayne, that you fled, in an obvious panic, simply because a Chinaman was discharged from hospital?" I asked. "Come—I'm not quite such a fool as to believe that! There's more behind all this!"

"You don't know those fellows, my lad!" he retorted. "I knew that when that Chink discovered that Holliment had sold his things he'd go bold-faced for him and for anybody connected with him. And he knew I was Holliment's partner."

"Depends what there was amongst the things, Mr. Quartervayne," I remarked, satirically. "However, you know! But go on."

"There's no more of it," he said. "I cleared—

for the day at any rate. I sent that note on to Holliment, by you. You know the rest. The Chink did go for Holliment—as you're aware. You know what happened."

I made no answer for a moment or two. I was reckoning things up, one way and another. And I was beginning to see light. Holliment, examining the Chinaman's effects, had found something of value—perhaps of great value. He had shown it, whatever it was, to his crony Quartermayne, and they had appropriated and sold it. There was no other conclusion to be drawn. But it was useless to cross-examine Quartermayne—except on one or two points personal to myself. And I reminded myself before entering on that stage of our proceedings that Quartermayne, presumably, knew nothing of my connection with Lady Renardsmere.

"Yes, I know what happened at that store of Holliment's, Mr. Quartermayne!" I said. "Who should know better? But now I want to ask you two or three questions. Holliment drove me out of Portsmouth that night in a car which was his—we started from some yard not far off his place. Now I want to know—were you with him?"

"Oh, well, my lad, if it comes to that," he said, with a sort of plausible indulgence in his tone, "I was! Not when you started—he picked me up a bit farther on. Nearer Cosham—top end of the town."

"I suppose I was asleep?" I suggested. "Fast asleep inside."

"Well, the fact of the case was, you were drugged," he replied coolly. "You'll maybe remember, he gave you a drink—to keep the cold out—just before you started? Well—doped, you understand? Harmless, though—you came to no harm."

"And the two of you disposed of me on Chilverton Downs, eh?" I said.

"Up above Manson's place—the trainer's," he answered. "Ah, I knew old Manson well enough! Run by his daughter now, that place is—and a damn smart girl she is, and a clever 'un! Yes, we put you down there, all comfortable—with a hundred pounds in your pocket, and a scrap of a note. Bit of compensation like—and a hundred pounds is a hundred pounds, my lad! I daresay it came in useful?—you were broke when I met you."

"Temporarily, Mr. Quaterqvayne!" I said. "Only for the time being. But why did you run that car over the edge of the old chalk-pit?"

"The damn thing broke down—hopelessly!" he answered. "Holliment, he couldn't get it to go, no-how, so we took off the number plate, and all that, and hid 'em amongst the heather—they'll be there now, if you hit on the right spot. Then him and me, we shoved the old ark across the turf and over the rim o' that pit, and smashed her up, good and proper, we didn't want tracing, d'ye see?"

"And after that, I suppose, you walked across country, in the early morning and got a train at some wayside station?" I suggested.

"You're right!" he assented. "We did! And came up here—and here we've been ever since. Then—this damned Chink turns up, as I feared he would, and he's done Holliment in!"

"Mr. Quartervayne!" said I. "If you're so certain that this Chinaman murdered Holliment, why don't you go to the police with your story?"

"No!" he exclaimed promptly. "No! I'll have no dealings with those chaps—never have had, and never will! Let 'em do their own work!—no help from me."

"You'd only have to tell them all you've told me," I said.

"Tell 'em—nothing!" he declared. "And how could I tell one Chinaman from another? Like as two peas is two Chinamen—yellow faces, slit eyes—can't tell Ching from Chang. No!"

"This man's name is Chuh Sin, according to you," I remarked.

"I reckon a Chinaman can change his name as easily as an Englishman," he retorted. "He might be Lo Ping or Ah Fu by now! I'm going to have no truck with any police! I'm fed up here! Going to clear out—first thing to-morrow morning. Hook of Holland first. You come—we'll go to Flushing or Middleburg. I'll pay you well as my clerk—I can see you're a smart chap, and no doubt a good scholar. I ain't—never had much schooling."

"I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Quartervayne, but I'm not going," I said. "I'm not afraid of this

mysterious and elusive Chinaman, though I won't deny that from your account of the whole thing, there seems to be some danger to anybody who's been unlucky enough to get mixed up with Holliment. But there are one or two more questions I'd like to ask you. And first—are you aware under what circumstances Holliment's dead body was found?"

He gave a sort of involuntary shudder and blinked his eyes rapidly.

"I know where he was found, and what had happened to him!" he muttered. "Them damned Chinks—a knife!—ah, don't they know how to use one! Ugh!"

"I'm not referring to that," said I. "Do you know that Holliment's watch and chain—worth at least fifty pounds—lay by him, on the path, that he'd three or four hundred pounds in ready money on him, also thrown carelessly aside—and that his clothes had been ripped and slit wherever it was likely that anything could be concealed in the padding or seams? Do you know all that, Mr. Quartervayne? You do!—then just you tell me—what was the murderer searching for? Come, now!"

But I knew as soon as ever I had put the direct question, that I was not going to get any straightforward answer from Quartervayne. However nervous and excited he might be, he was sufficiently master of himself to control his features, and his big, moon-like face became blank and impassive. He

lifted his pudgy fingers, stroked his chin, and shook his head.

"Can't say!" he answered. "Ways o' them Eastern chaps are beyond me—don't understand 'em!"

"Perhaps—but you've sufficient knowledge of human nature to know that to Eastern or Western, a valuable gold watch and three or four hundred pounds in cash are a bit tempting, when you've nothing to do but pocket them!" I said, still eyeing him narrowly. "And you know jolly well, Mr. Quartervayne, that this was no ordinary murder! It wasn't the work of a footpad, done for what he could get from his victim. Whoever it was that murdered Holliment—and it mayn't have been this Chinaman, when all's said and done——"

"Who else could it be?" he demanded sharply. "Who else?"

"It might have been an Englishman," I said. "I don't know—and you don't know. But as I was saying—whoever did it was after something that he believed Holliment to have on him. He searched rapidly and frantically for it, throwing all else aside——"

"Look you here, my lad!" he interrupted. "You're damned clever, no doubt, but there's other theories than yours! There's this—the Chink was interrupted before he could gather up the watch and the money! He heard somebody coming—and he hopped it!"

"Tell that to the marines, Mr. Quartervayne," I exclaimed. "It's a theory that's full of holes! It won't hold water for one minute. He'd time to rip up Holliment's clothing, to cut into the padding at his shoulders, to examine and slit his waistband, to find out if he was wearing a belt under his shirt! No—he was after something. Now what?"

"I tell you I don't know!" he asserted. "I know nothing about it!"

"Very good!" said I. "But do you know a man named Neamore—Percy Neamore?"

He started as if I had held a revolver at him, and his big face paled.

"What do you know about Neamore?" he demanded. "When——"

"Never mind!" I retorted. "Do you know him? I think you do, Mr. Quartervayne, and I'll tell you why. Holliment and Neamore were in the Warrington Hotel, in Maida Vale, very late last night, and when they left together they went to see somebody in Delaware Road, close by—and not far from the scene of the murder. Did they go to see you, Mr. Quartervayne? Because I saw you in Delaware Road this very afternoon, in a taxi-cab! Now come—who is Neamore?"

He stared at me, hard, for a minute, in silence—then suddenly rising, he made straight out of the room. Before I could follow, he had walked out of the hotel and into the night.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRAIN GOES OUT

I LAY awake for a long time that night, endeavouring to think things out. It seemed to me if one was going to get at any clear view of the entire, utterly puzzling situation, one had got to go back as far as possible—at any rate, to some definite point at which these present matters began. And as far as I was in possession of facts, the thing seemed to have had its beginning with that astute, watchful, inscrutable old Chinaman whom I had seen at the Langham Hotel—Mr. Cheng. I tried to get the events into sequence—figuring, of course very largely on probabilities. I put it in this way—Mr. Cheng is a wealthy Chinese financier. He comes to Europe on some business or other: he has secretaries and servants with him. During his stay in Paris, one of these followers robs him of something—to be exact, from what I have already learnt, the man is one Chuh Sin. Chuh Sin, having robbed his master of this Something, escapes to England. He turns up at Portsmouth—perhaps he struck there from Southampton, having travelled by way of Havre. He puts himself up at Holliment's Temperance Hotel,

and after a time, being taken ill, goes to hospital, leaving all his effects in Holliment's hands. Coming out of hospital unexpectedly, he finds that Holliment has appropriated that Something. He goes for Holliment—he gets a gang of loafers together and conducts an attack on Holliment's store. Holliment flies—and Chuh Sin somehow gets on his track. Probably Chuh Sin has English friends in London—anyway somebody murders Holliment, and turns him inside out, as it were, in a frantic search for that Something. All that seems plain, straightforward, precise. And out of it rise some queer questions.

What is the Something?

Why won't Mr. Cheng tell the English police what it is?

Were Holliment, Quartermayne, and Neamore partners in the appropriation—in plain language, the stealing of it?

Did Neamore sell the Something to Lady Renardsmere—for ten thousand pounds?

Did I—in utter innocence—carry It, whatever it may be, from Lady Renardsmere to Mr. Pennithwaite?

Is It—this thing, which bids fair to cause murder and all sorts of horrors and unpleasantness—now safely reposing in Mr. Pennithwaite's safe in Lincoln's Inn Fields, while a bloodthirsty Chinaman, shielded, no doubt, by some English associates, is prowling about on a relentless search for it?

It seemed to me as I lay there, wide awake, staring into the blackness of my room, that I knew more about the whole thing than anybody! And the question forced itself again and again upon me—Ought I to tell all I knew to the police, to Jifferdene, at once?

I didn't know how to answer that question. I didn't want to bring Lady Renardsmere into this business—at any rate, until I had seen and talked to her. If only Jifferdene would let me go back to Renardsmere I could tell Lady Renardsmere all I knew, all I had found out about Neamore, whoever he was, and about his undoubted association with Holliment and Quartermayne, and I would beg her to communicate with the police herself. For I was certain by that time that Chuh Sin and his English friends would stick at nothing to recover that Something, and we might be having murder done at Renardsmere House. Tell Lady Renardsmere the whole story I would!—as soon as I could get at her. And Peggie Manson, too—perhaps Peggie first. For I had seen enough of Peggie to know that if ever there was a young woman who had a headpiece screwed on straight and tight, Peggie was she.

But there was that infernal inquest.

I dreaded that business. I had never given evidence in my life—before either judge, magistrate, or coroner. I didn't know what they mightn't get out of me. I supposed—being wholly ignorant of the procedure in their affairs—that the police would

have at any rate something to do with it! perhaps, nay, probably, Jifferdene would have already suggested to the Coroner that I knew a lot. I was afraid of having to introduce Lady Renardsmere's name—altogether, I didn't know with what questions I mightn't be faced. And if I let things out, about Lady Renardsmere and Neamore, Jifferdene would turn on me and want to know why the devil I hadn't told *him* all that? Yes, certainly, I said to myself as I tossed and tumbled about, I knew a precious lot more than Jifferdene knew that I knew!—and I heartily wished I didn't.

I rather overslept myself, out of sheer weariness, in the end, and it was past nine o'clock when I went down to the coffee-room for breakfast. Half-way through it, and while I was reading an account of the Holliment murder, a very guarded and concise one, obviously inspired by the police, and suggesting more mystery in the affair than I knew it to possess, I was called to the telephone. Jifferdene was at the other end. He said that he was busy about the opening of the inquest on Holliment, at Paddington that afternoon and couldn't get on to see me for two or three hours—would I be in the hotel between twelve-thirty and one? I promised that I would—and then asked him a question.

“Any developments?”

“No!” he answered. “But I may hear of one or two by noon. Look here!—you keep quiet till I come—don't go wandering round, mum's the word!”

"All right!" said I. "Twelve-thirty or thereabouts, then—here."

I rang him off before he had a chance to say more. For already, while we talked, and as soon as I found that he wouldn't want me until noon, I had determined, having two hours to myself, to do a bit of detective work on my own account. I went back and finished my breakfast, and then set about doing it.

I was going to the Ritz Hotel. I had an object in view. When Lady Renardsmere had carried off Neamore in her car to town, I had heard her tell Walker, the chauffeur, to go straight to the Ritz—I wanted to know if Neamore had gone there with her, and, more important still, if they had been joined by anybody. For it seemed to me a highly probable thing that the transaction which resulted in Lady Renardsmere handing over a cheque for ten thousand pounds to Neamore had been carried out there—and possibly with the assistance of a third, and perhaps a fourth party—at whose identities I was already guessing.

I went to the Ritz—with a little management I got hold of a highly important dignitary in the waiting line, who, I knew, would be likely to know who lunched there three days before. I made use of a little weapon with which Jifferdene had furnished me—one of his own official cards. This, with a well-assumed air of mystery and confidence, I showed to my man when I had got him aside.

"I want a little information from you," I said. "Absolutely confidential and private, and between ourselves, of course. Do you know Lady Renardsmere?"

"Of Park Lane?" he replied at once. "Oh, certainly!"

"Did she come here to lunch three days ago?" I asked.

"She did—oh, yes!" he answered.

"With a youngish, well-dressed—rather overdressed—gentleman—a Jew?" I enquired.

"That's so," he assented.

"Did you know him?"

"No!—never remember seeing him before—here or elsewhere."

"Did anybody join them?"

He nodded—evidently his recollection was very clear.

"When they came—in Lady Renardsmere's car—she came in and bespoke a table for four. Then the young gentleman went to the telephone. After that he and she waited in the lounge. About half-past one two men came in—the man with Lady Renardsmere introduced them to her. Then they all lunched together."

"Can you describe the two men?" I asked.

"Well," he answered. "I should say—you understand?—they weren't gentlemen. Well dressed men, and well behaved—but you know what I mean. I set 'em down as men associated with the Turf: of course,

we know Lady Renardsmere, and that she's a well-known owner: that filly of hers, Rippling Ruby, is about dead certain to pull off the Derby. I thought these men were meeting her ladyship about racing matters."

"But—their appearance?"

"One man was tall, stoutish, florid-faced; the other was stoutish, too, but short. Each wore a grey tweed suit—new suits, they were, too. And grey Homburg hats, with black bands. The other man, who came with her, wore town clothes and a silk hat."

"Did you see any business transacted between them?" I enquired. "Any signing of papers or anything?"

"Yes," he replied. "I served them myself with coffee and liqueurs after lunch, and I saw Lady Renardsmere at a side-table, writing a cheque. She handed it to the man who came in with her at first."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Did they all leave together?" I asked.

"No," he said. "The three men went away soon after I'd seen Lady Renardsmere writing the cheque; she waited here till her car came round for her at three o'clock."

"You see a great many people," I remarked. "Had you ever seen any one of these three men previously?"

"No!" he replied confidently. "Never! Absolute strangers to me—all three! And I know this part of the town pretty well!"

I went away, knowing now that whoever Neamore might be, he had introduced Holliment and Quarter-vayne to Lady Renardsmere at the Ritz Hotel, and that in all probability she had there bought from the three of them the Something that Holliment had stolen from Chuh Sin and that Chuh Sin had filched from his master, the Sphinx-like Mr. Cheng. What was it? Why, once more—wouldn't Mr. Cheng tell us?

I went back to my own hotel, revolving these mysteries—and at half-past twelve in walked Jifferdene, obviously vexed.

"Here's a fine do!" he exclaimed as he dropped into a chair at my side in the smoking-room. "That infernal old Chinaman's gone!"

"Mr. Cheng?" I said.

"No other! Cleared out—last night," he answered. "Not so long after we'd seen him, either. Left by the night mail for Paris. Confound him!—I've had all my morning's work, or most of it, for nothing."

"How exactly?" I asked.

"Well, you see," he replied, "I made up my mind, last night, I'd have him at the inquest. What he wouldn't tell us, I knew he'd have to tell if we got him into a witness-box, and as there's no prospect at present of getting him before a magistrate I thought

I'd get him before a coroner. And I set to work fixing it this morning with the Paddington coroner, and got him to issue a witness summons for Mr. Cheng and I went myself with his officer to serve it. But when we got to the Langham Hotel, the old owl had flown! And there we are! For it seems to me that Mr. Cheng holds the key to the situation."

"Exactly how?" I asked, anxious to know what was in Jifferdene's mind.

"This way," he answered. "I make no doubt that Holliment was murdered by that Chink that Mr. Cheng wants to lay hands on—I make no doubt, either, that that Chink stole something from Mr. Cheng, and that he in his turn was robbed by Holliment. I think the Chink turned Holliment inside out, so to speak, in his search for that something. Follow me?"

I followed him well enough, knowing what I did, and said so.

"Well, I wanted to make Mr. Cheng tell us, straight out, what it was," he said. "It would simplify matters, but as I say, he's hopped it!"

"Do you think Mr. Shen knows?" I suggested.

"He doesn't!" he answered. "We went there as soon as I found that Mr. Cheng had left. Mr. Shen came out of his shell a bit this time, and he assured me that they haven't the least idea why Mr. Cheng wanted to lay hands on this mysterious Chink—all they know is that he was damned anxious to do so, and willing to go to any expense in the matter."

"Then you're practically no wiser than before?" I said.

"Precious little!" he muttered, grumbly. "And up to now we've got no clue, no trace—beyond what you know of."

"About this inquest?" I asked.

"Three o'clock this afternoon," he answered. "It'll be a mere formality. There'll be the evidence of the policeman who found Holliment, and the police-surgeon's, and yours. Then the Coroner will adjourn for, say, a week or a fortnight. Can't go further than that, at present."

"Will they ask me a lot of questions?" I enquired.

"Not to-day, anyway," he said. "All you'll have to do will be to identify him as a man you knew in Portsmouth by the name of Holliment. Later—when we've got more details, you'll have to tell the story of those doings at Holliment's store. But to-day—next to nothing. A formal affair! Let's pick a bit of lunch, and we'll go up to Paddington and hear if Birkem's got any more information."

Birkem, discovered later at the Paddington Police Station, had progressed a little, he had heard of a stranger who had lodged at a house in Delaware Road for the last two or three weeks and had left suddenly on the day after Holliment's murder. And as he was going round to make further enquiries into this, we went with him—to a house in the front window of which was displayed a card whereon was inscribed the words Superior Apartments. Its land-

lady, presently interviewed, was one of those faded persons whose very appearance and manner make it unnecessary for them to tell you that they have seen better days, and she was quite ready to tell the police-officer anything she knew. She had had, for about three weeks, a lodger who called himself Mr. Carr. He was a tall, portly gentleman, who evidently had plenty of money, and ate and drank very well. He did not go out a great deal, except of an evening. He was a great buyer of newspapers, especially of sporting papers; he had left behind him a pile that high of such journals and a lot of books about racing. He wrote a lot of letters, and he had a good many telegrams come for him of an afternoon, between half-past-two and six o'clock.

"Results!" muttered Jifferdene. "Did he have any visitors, ma'am?"

"He never had a single caller until night before last," replied the landlady. "Then, very late indeed—close on twelve o'clock—two gentlemen came to see him. I was just retiring when they knocked at the door."

"Did you see them, ma'am?" asked Jifferdene.

"I let them in—myself," she answered. "One was a short, stoutish gentleman; the other was a younger gentleman—I should say he was a Jewish person. They asked for Mr. Carr and I showed them into his sitting-room. They were there perhaps ten minutes—then all three went out together."

"Did Mr. Carr say anything to you about going out?" asked Birkem.

"No! He had a latch-key," said the landlady. "I heard him come in again about three o'clock in the morning."

"Alone?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Say anything to you, afterwards, about being out so late?"

"Oh, no! He came in quite quietly. He was a very quiet, well-conducted man."

"And about his leaving?" asked Birkem. "Left suddenly, didn't he?"

"Very! Yesterday afternoon. He came in and told me he was obliged to go to the Continent, on business, and he'd packed his things and was off, in a taxi-cab, in twenty minutes. Perhaps you'd like to see his sitting-room?—it's just as he left it."

The two detectives were pleased to see the sitting-room, and examined it very thoroughly. I don't know whether their professional eyes saw anything that mine didn't perceive; what I saw was a considerable collection of issues of the *Sportsman*, *Sporting Times*, *Ruff's Guide*, and similar publications, and a large heap of telegrams, carefully stacked on a side-table, from which I gathered that Mr. Carr had amused himself during his quiet residence in Delaware Road by backing his fancy, and had sometimes won and sometimes lost.

"That's Quartermayne, of course," remarked Jif-

ferdene when we left. "Now if we could only have got hold of *him*! But it's another case of the Continent. Well . . . this inquest."

The inquest, so much dreaded by me, proved to be a very formal affair—a mere opening of proceedings. And after all, I was never called. The housekeeper of Holliment's Temperance Hotel, having seen the news of his murder, had hurried up to town—she was some relation of his, and she identified him. I might just as well have stayed away.

"But you'll be wanted next time, Mr. Cranage," said Jifferdene, when the coroner had adjourned the enquiry for a fortnight. "It'll all have to come out then—and no doubt lots more."

"Anyway, I can go now?" I suggested. "I shall just catch the 4.53 at Victoria."

We parted, and I went off—thankful to be free, and intent on getting back to Renardsmere, so that I could tell Peggie Manson everything and ask her advice. I was pushed for time, and I only got to Victoria two minutes before the 4.53 was due out. And just as I was about to climb into it, I heard a shouting and commotion behind me, and turning saw Jifferdene running down the platform, waving me to stop. I stopped—and the train went out. Jifferdene came on, breathless, panting.

"Quartermayne!" he whispered, as he reached me. "Quartermayne! Found in the East End! Murdered!"

CHAPTER XII

THE SECOND MURDER

I AM not ashamed to confess that I felt a disagreeably cold thrill run shivering along my spine as the detective whispered that last word. Murder!—again? This was the second time within three days that I had heard of the murder of a man whom I myself had seen alive and in vigorous health only a few hours before he was struck down. And—who next?

I let out the usual commonplace exclamation as I stood there, staring.

“Impossible! Quartermayne? Why——”

But I checked myself in time. No!—I was not going to tell Jifferdene anything until I had been to Renardsmere. I glanced wistfully after the train, now vanishing in the distance—there went my last chance of getting to Renardsmere that night—unless, indeed, I chartered a car. And in the meantime . . .

“Nothing impossible about it!” retorted Jifferdene. “There’s no doubt it’s Quartermayne—from the description sent on.”

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "Then you're not dead certain?"

"I'm dead certain, myself," he answered, drawing me away towards the barrier at the top of the platform. "Come on!—we must go there. I hurried off to stop you as soon as I heard."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Hotel—low class place—down the Docks way," he replied. "The facts are these—as they came over the telephone. A man went to this hotel very late last night and booked a room, saying he wanted to catch one of that Batavier line steamers at noon to-day, and giving instructions that they needn't call him until eleven-thirty. They called him at that time, got no answer, eventually entered his room, found him dead—murdered. From the description, it's Quartermayne!"

"But it mayn't be," I said, though, secretly, in view of what Quartermayne himself had told me about leaving for Holland, I felt sure that Jifferdene's surmise was correct. "It mayn't be!"

"We'll soon settle that!" he retorted grimly. "You know him, at any rate. Come on!—let's get down there."

He hurried me off to the District Railway and into an eastbound train. I made no attempt to talk to him during our short journey; I was thinking hard about my own affairs, my next procedure. And I made up my mind that as soon as I had been with him to wherever it was we were going just then, I

would leave him and get down to Renardsmere, even if it was in the middle of the night and if it cost me ten pounds for a car. Whatever else was in the wind, I must have speech with Lady Renardsmere.

We left the train at Mark Lane, and passing across Tower Hill and by the Mint, plunged into some mean and squalid streets in the immediate neighbourhood of St. Katherine's Docks. Jifferdene evidently knew his way well enough. He led me straight to a police-station, where he was presently in close conversation with officials. Presently he pointed to me, standing apart.

"This gentleman can identify him," he said. "He knew him—well enough."

Once more I was forced, sorely against my will, to accompany Jifferdene to a mortuary. It was close by, and if anything it was gloomier and more sordid than that in which I had seen Holliment's dead body. And presently I found myself looking at Quartermayne's . . .

"Yes!" I muttered. "Oh, yes! That's—Quartermayne! And now let's get out of this!"

We got out. Jifferdene took and shook my arm.

"Put that out of your head, now, my lad!" he said, not unkindly. "That's done!—had to be done, you know. I was right, you see. Well—that's the second!"

"How—how was it?" I asked. "You haven't said."

"Knifed!—like the other," he answered, with a

shake of his head. "Knifed! But this time, within four walls. Come on—we'll go to this hotel where it was done."

The man who had accompanied us from the local police-station led us through one or two more shabby streets into a quiet thoroughfare at the lower end of which I saw a high wall and above it the masts and spars and funnels of ships and steamers.

"St. Katherine's Docks!" muttered Jifferdene, seeing me look in that direction. "Likely he was going to sail from there. But they say he mentioned that Batavier Line—their boats run from nearer London Bridge. Still, that's not many minutes sharp walk. And he came here, anyway—to his end."

He waved his hand, and I saw that we had come to the scene of the murder: a mean and shabby place in a mean and shabby street. Two or three of the old grey brick houses had been thrown into one: across the level of the first-story window a long narrow wooden sign ran—a blue ground with faded gilt letters: *Kellerman's Private Hotel*. One of the lower windows was labelled Coffee Room; another Commercial Room—it passed my comprehension how either could invite patronage: the mere sight of the dirty blinds and window curtains was enough.

We walked in. In a dirty entrance hall, and in an atmosphere redolent of stale food, stewed tea, mutton chops, vegetables, a man came to meet us—

a fat, frowsy man, in his shirt-sleeves, whose chief characteristic at that moment was a nervous anxiety. He made a bow that was almost an obeisance to the two detectives and to me, and hastened to open the door of what was obviously his own private parlour. There sat a very fat woman, sewing, who, on our appearance, became as nervous and flustered as the man. She got busy in offering chairs, meanwhile the man stood mute, watching us: it was very evident to me that he was sorely upset. But Jifferdene, having ascertained from his companion that this was Mr. Kellerman and that Mrs. Kellerman, put him on an easier footing with a word or two.

"Nasty thing for you, this, Mr. Kellerman," he said, consolingly. "No fault of yours, of course, but an unpleasant thing to have in your house."

The landlord sighed, as if in relief at hearing comfortable words. But the landlady spoke.

"Yes, sir—and us knowing nothing about it, nothing—until the boots made that awful discovery," she said. "We didn't even know the gentleman was in the house!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Jifferdene. "Didn't know—why, don't you know what customers you have in here?"

"It is this way, gentlemen," said the landlord, speaking in the slow, somewhat laboured fashion of a man who uses an acquired tongue. "The trade of this house is—what you call exceptional. The docks

—they are close by. People—seafaring people—they will come in here at all hours of the night, just wanting a bed for a few hours, eh! So we keep a night-porter, who is on duty all night long. Our-selves—me and my wife—we are hard-working people—we go to our bed at eleven. After that—we do not know who may be in the house—so!”

“Who does?” demanded Jifferdene. “The night-porter? Just so—well, we want to see him, then.”

The landlord went out, and presently returned with a man who, as Jifferdene afterwards remarked, looked as if he had been a professional pugilist and had managed to survive a good deal of punishment. He had a battered nose, a scarred face, and a watchful eye, and it occurred to me that he would probably be just as useful in ejecting a visitor as in receiving one. He gave the detective a quiet and cautious nod, and when Jifferdene invited him to sit down, he perched his big, heavy figure on the edge of a chair in such a fashion as to suggest that he was not the man to commit himself to anything, either in word or deed.

“So you were in charge here last night, after Mr. and Mrs. Kellerman had retired?” suggested Jifferdene. “Just tell us what occurred about this murdered man coming here.”

The night-porter was evidently prepared for this. He entered on his story with a promptitude which showed that he had already thought it out.

“As far as I’m concerned, guv’nor, there was

nothing occurred as was out o' the common!" he answered. "Nothing! I come on duty at eleven o'clock, as usual, when the boss there goes to bed—"

"There was three gentlemen in the house, then," interrupted Mrs. Kellerman. "Three highly respectable gentlemen—all customers. Commercial. Which they had all retired for the night."

"At eleven o'clock," continued the night-porter, imperturbably. "All's quiet, then—all's quiet till five minutes past twelve—midnight. Then this here gentleman what we found dead this morning comes in. He says he wants a bedroom, and not to be called or bothered till eleven-thirty, 'cause his boat don't sail till past noon and he's minded for a good sleep. He pays for his bed and breakfast in advance—according to rule—four bob. Then he says he ain't sleepy yet, and he'll have a smoke. I shows him into the little smoke-room, side o' the hall, and he asks me then if I could get him a cork-screw, a clean glass, and some fresh water? I goes off to get 'em, and when I comes back, he'd got a bottle o' whiskey on the table in front of him. He drew the cork, helped himself, and sat down with his pipe and glass."

"Did he give you a drink?" enquired Jifferdene.

"He did not! I left him," continued the night-porter. "If you want to know, I'd got a drop o' rum of my own, outside, where I sits, o' nights. I'd just lighted my pipe and was going to read the evening newspaper when two men comes in at the

front door. They wanted beds, and paid for 'em. And seeing the smoke-room door open, and a light in there, they said something about a cigar and walked in."

"Before you go any further," interrupted Jifferdene, "can you describe these men?"

"Not in particular," answered the night-porter, with a decisive shake of his head. "I didn't take that notice of 'em. Seafaring men, I should say. They was both dressed in blue serge, and I should think about thirty to forty years old. Nothing remarkable about 'em—ordinary. One fellow had gold rings in his ears—I did notice that."

"Well," said Jifferdene. "Anything happen?"

"Not for five minutes or so," replied the night-porter. "Then the man what had come in first knocked on the table. I went to see what he wanted. 'Bring two more clean glasses, my lad' he said, 'and more water—these gentlemen'll drink with me.' So I got what he wanted, and the other two pulled their chairs up to his table, and I left 'em talking and drinking together."

Mrs. Kellerman interpolated a remark that was obviously apologetic.

"Of course," she said, eyeing the detective blandly, "of course if a gentleman chooses to bring a bottle of spirits in with him and to offer it to any other gentlemen——"

Jifferdene waved this away as unimportant, and nodded at the night-porter.

"Go on!" he said. "All three started hob-nobbing. And kept it up—how long?"

"Till they'd finished the bottle what the first man brought in," answered the night-porter. "It was near two o'clock, then. Then they all come out into the hall and asked me to show 'em their rooms."

"How do you know they'd finished the bottle?" asked Jifferdene.

"'Cause I looked at it when I came down and went to turn out the gas, empty!"

"Were they sober?"

"Sober enough—quiet enough, anyway. Said good-night civil enough to each other, and to me."

"You heard no quarrelling, or anything?"

"Nothing at all. I heard most o' what they said over their drink. They were talking about foreign parts—trade, and that sort o' thing."

"And their bedrooms?" asked Jifferdene. "Were they near together?"

"The man that came by himself—him as we found dead—he'd number 15. The other two—one had 16, the other 18. Number 15 is exactly opposite 16."

"When did you see them next?"

"16 and 18 come down at a quarter to seven, just as I was going off duty. They said they didn't want no breakfast, here, and went away."

"Did you see them take any particular direction?"

"They strolled off towards the Docks," said the night-porter.

"Well—and the other man?" enquired Jifferdene, after a pause.

The night-porter made a grimace.

"Ah!" he said. "I'd just gone to bed when that come up! I goes to bed at eleven every forenoon and gets up six o'clock in the evening. The boots—he comes and rouses me out and says he can't get no answer from 15. So I goes with him, and after a bit me and the boss there opened the door. And then—well—there was blood! Knifed—right through his throat. And we sends for the police."

"Which they've had charge of everything, and kept the room locked, ever since, gentlemen," remarked Mrs. Kellerman. "There's a constable up there now, in charge—perhaps he's expecting you?"

"Yes," assented Jifferdene. "We'll go up."

Upstairs the whole place was shabbier, more down-at-heel than ever. We traversed a corridor or two; finally came to one that led to the back of the house. At a window at its far end stood a uniformed policeman, obviously much bored. He came forward on seeing the local detective and produced a key. A moment later we all stood in Number 15.

"Nothing's been touched or moved," remarked the policeman in a low voice. "Leastways, not since we were called in."

One look at the bed was enough for me—I was glad to turn away to the window, whither Jifferdene, for some reason or other, had repaired immediately on our entrance. He tapped my elbow, pointing with his other hand.

“No fastening to the window-sashes,” he muttered. “Window open, too, now what’s outside?”

He threw up the lower sash and looked out. Just beneath was the flat roof of some lower building; on either side there was spouting; down below was a court, from which a dark, narrow alley opened.

“A man used to climbing could have got in here through this window,” remarked Jifferdene, musingly. “It’s my notion somebody did—I don’t think anything of that other tale! Well—let’s have a look round.”

He and the local man began to examine the room and the murdered man’s clothing. I at once recognised the suit which I had seen Quartervayne wearing the night before; I saw too that it had been treated exactly as Holliment’s clothing had—the padding at the shoulders had been ripped to pieces; wherever there was a chance of anything being secreted a knife had been at work. As to the dead man’s effects, his watch and chain—valuable things—lay on a chest of drawers, near it a pocketbook lay, in which were a number of Bank of England notes and a letter of credit for a considerable amount on an Amsterdam Bank; close by were several other personal things, a silver cigar-case,

a silver match-box, and so on. And there was a purse—empty.

“Taken the cash, this time!” remarked Jifferdene, significantly. “But—it wasn’t that he was after!”

I went outside and waited; eventually, I made my way down to the front door and into the street, sick of the whole thing. It was some time before Jifferdene and his companion joined me.

“Made any discoveries?” I asked as we walked away.

“There’s one thing I noticed,” remarked Jifferdene, after a pause, during which he seemed to be thinking hard. “I believe it’s not an uncommon thing, too, in hotels of that class in this part of the town. The door was furnished with a good lock and a stout bolt—no ordinary gimcrack affairs such as you see in better-class hotels. The thing is—did he use both?”

“Couldn’t have used the bolt,” observed the other detective, “because the landlord opened the door with a master-key. If the bolt had been shot _____”

“Well, it’s my belief the murderer entered by the window!” said Jifferdene. “However, whichever way he entered, he did his work! This is that sneaking Chinaman, Mr. Cranage,” he continued when we had got to ourselves. “Didn’t Mr. Cheng tell us that there’d be a second murder, and a third, and——”

"You think the two murders are by the same hand?" I suggested.

"Sure of it!" he answered. "Look at the circumstances! Quartervayne, of course, was followed down here—and done in! It's the Chink!"

"You don't suspect the two men who followed him into the hotel?" I asked.

"I don't! I think they were just casual visitors—like himself. No—it's some slit-eyed Chinaman! Look here!"

He drew from his pocket something carefully wrapped in soft paper and his own handkerchief, and having removed the wrappings revealed a plain, common bedroom tumbler, which he held up between me and the light. There, on its sides, I saw clearly the imprint of two unusually slender forefingers and of a thumb.

"That's not been done by any European hand!" said Jifferdene, triumphantly. "It's an Eastern thumb and Eastern fingers that did that! He took a drink of water after his bloody work, and—there you are! Mr. Cranage, we'll have to rake London to get that Chink, or there'll be another of these affairs. But—who will it be next? However—don't you get frightened. Stick to me in the daytime, and keep to your hotel after dark, and . . ."

I was not going to my hotel, though I said nothing to make Jifferdene think that I wasn't. I got away from him, on a plausible excuse. Then, to put some heart into me, I went and ate a good

dinner, resolutely thrusting away the gruesome recollections of what I had just seen. And later I went off to a garage, and having plenty of money about me and being utterly careless as to how it flew, chartered a good car and got out of London. And at close on one o'clock in the morning, I made up the drive to Peggie Manson's house, resolved on seeing her.

CHAPTER XIII

MISS HEPPLE TAKES A HAND

MANSON LODGE—designed to his own tastes and ordered by Peggie's father, the late famous trainer, was a big house, with more than one main entrance. But by that time I knew it well enough and made straight for a door that stood just beneath Peggie's own bedroom, the windows of which overlooked the stables and their adjacent buildings. There was a bell in that door, an electric bell, which communicated with Peggie's room, so that she could be summoned at any hour of the night. And I had just put a finger on it and had heard the sharp response in the room above, through a half-open window, when a man, tall, burly, seemed to start up from nowhere—in reality out of the shrubbery close by—and laid an unpleasantly strong hand on my arm.

"Hullo, you!" he demanded.

"Hullo, yourself!" I retorted, starting back from him. "Who the devil are you? Take your hand off!"

"Not till I know what you're after, young fellow!" he answered. "What are you doing prowling round here, this time o' night?"

"What are you doing here—on private ground?" I demanded. "Tell me that!"

"That's my business!" he retorted. "What's yours?"

"None of your business!" I said. "You let my arm go, or——"

But at that moment a vision of white draperies appeared at the window above us and I heard Peggie's voice.

"What's all that?" she exclaimed. "Who is it?"

I got in first.

"Peggie!" I called, using her Christian name in my excitement. "It's I—Cranage! Come down, and let me in! I've motored all the way from town to see you!—I must see you at once. Come down—and bring Miss Hepple with you. And there's a man here, prowling about your grounds ——"

"Oh!" she cried. "All right, Mr. Robindale—that's Mr. Cranage, Lady Renardsmere's private secretary. I'll come down at once."

Mr. Robindale, whoever he was, let my arm go, and growled.

"Why didn't you say who you were?" he demanded.

"Why didn't you say who you were?" I retorted. "And what're you doing here, anyhow?"

He edged away from me in the direction of the stables.

"Ask your mistress!" he muttered.

He went off, still growling, and I went up to the door and waited. Some minutes passed; then a light appeared behind the glass panels; locks and bolts were undone, the door opened, and there, wide-eyed with astonishment, stood Peggie and Miss Hepple, in dressing gowns, and carrying lamps. I made in, and with my own hand closed and locked the door.

"Who's that fellow outside?" I asked abruptly. "He's left the marks of his great fingers on my arm, confound him!"

Peggie, still staring wonderingly at me, shook her head.

"Since yesterday, for some reason or other only known to herself, Lady Renardsmere has planted a couple of private detectives on me," she answered. "One's on the watch all day; the other all night. That's the night man—Robindale. But—you?"

"Take me into the dining-room and give me a drink, first," I answered. "I've come as fast as I could—chartered a special car—to see you and Miss Hepple before going to see Lady Renardsmere. You've no idea what I've got to tell you—all in continuation of that Portsmouth affair! There's murder arising out of that—wholesale murder! And my God!—I don't know which way to turn!"

"Come into the little morning room," said Peggie. She bustled about, lighting a lamp, getting me whiskey and soda and biscuits, and commanding me to say no more until I had had a drink. Then, when she saw I was getting a bit calmer, she nodded re-assuringly. "Now!" she went on. "Tell us all about it—and take your time—we're safe, here."

The three of us, I dusty and travel-stained, Peggie in a smart dressing-gown with her great mane of hair coiled loosely about her shapely head, Miss Hepple in a multifarious collection of shawls and wraps, sat gathered around a table. And over it, looking from one to the other of the two pairs of eyes which never left mine, I told the full story of what had happened to me since Spiller fetched me away from Renardsmere House not forty-eight hours before. I spared no detail, the thing took some time to tell: the clock on the mantelpiece struck three as I made an end.

"And that's that!" I concluded. "And—what am I to do?"

"There's one thing I don't quite understand," said Peggie. "Why didn't you tell the London police all you knew—about Neamore, and the luncheon at the Ritz with Holliment and Quarter-vayne, and so on? It'll have to come out."

"Maybe—but I didn't want it to come out through me," I answered. "You see, if I'd told all that at once, how did I know that before I could

warn her, Lady Renardsmere mightn't be placed in some danger? The news would have gone beyond the police—it might have got into the papers, and then this Chinaman and his gang—for there must be a gang!—would have got to know—lots of things that I hope they don't know now."

"He did right!" remarked Miss Hepple suddenly. "He must tell Lady Renardsmere all that he's told us, and leave her to inform the police."

"Of what?" asked Peggie.

"I think the whole thing is very simple," replied Miss Hepple, who, I had observed, had followed my story with concentrated and even absorbed attention. "It seems so to me, at any rate. Mr. Cheng, the wealthy and apparently influential Chinaman, is robbed, in Paris, by his secretary Chuh Sin, of some exceedingly valuable article—we don't know what. Chuh Sin, with this in his possession, escapes to England, and comes to lodge at Holliment's Temperance Hotel in Portsmouth. Holliment and Quartervayne (never mind what Quartervayne says to the contrary, or doesn't say!) undoubtedly possess themselves of the stolen article. Chuh Sin goes in pursuit, and presumably enlists the assistance of some English crooks—isn't that the word? Holliment is tracked and murdered. But they didn't find the stolen article on him. So they tracked and murdered Quartervayne. Now," concluded Miss Hepple, looking hard at me through her spectacles, which she had not forgotten to assume

in her hurried dressing. "Did they find it on him?"

"God knows!" said I. "But I reckon—not!"

"I don't think they did," she said, nodding with judicial emphasis. "I do *not* think they did. Therefore——"

"They're still on the prowl?" I suggested.

"Exactly!" assented Miss Hepple. "And we shall hear of another murder!"

Peggie drew in her breath with a shudder of horror. But Miss Hepple and I appeared to be fellows in the stern art of looking facts in the face.

"Neamore—next?" I said, glancing at her.

"I should say so," she replied. "If they know—what you know."

"And if they go working back," I said, "then—well, Lady Renardsmere, next?"

But Miss Hepple shook her head.

"No!" she answered. "I think that—if they can only get inside knowledge—the next will be Pennithwaite, the solicitor. For I haven't the slightest doubt that the article—which must be one of most exceptional value and importance considering what's being done to regain possession of it—is now in Pennithwaite's hands!"

"You think I carried it to him?" I suggested.

"I do!" she assented. "I put it in this way. Holliment, Quartervayne, and Neamore were all known to each other, before this affair began. When Holliment and Quartervayne went to London, after

fleeing from Portsmouth, they told Neamore of what they'd got. It was decided, between the three, that Neamore should sell it. Neamore is evidently a man who knows things—anyway, it's quite certain that he knew of a certain weakness of Lady Renardsmere."

"What weakness?" I asked.

Miss Hepple glanced at Peggie and smiled.

"I thought everybody knew of that!" said Peggie.

"It's common property!"

"Evidently Mr. Cranage doesn't," remarked Miss Hepple. She turned to me again. "Lady Renardsmere," she continued, "has a perfect passion for buying precious stones! She must have spent a considerable amount of the vast fortune which Sir William left her in buying them. Nobody knows what she buys them for! she doesn't wear them. Nobody knows, either, where she keeps them—unless it's at her bank, or at some Safe Deposit. But some of her purchases have been notorious—I should have thought you'd have heard of them, Mr. Cranage. She bought the Metchnikoffski Diamond, some years ago—a fabulous price. Nobody's ever seen it since. She possesses the most marvellous rope of pearls in the world—to complete it, some little time ago, she gave some foreign dealer a tremendous sum for three pearls said to be unequalled for size and purity. Oh, it's all well known! And it's my opinion that this stolen article, through the successive thefts of which men are getting murdered, is some rare stone, and that Neamore, Holliment,

and Quaterwayne offered it and sold it to her. I think she brought it home with her from London that night, and sent you back to London with it, to Mr. Pennithwaite, next day. That, Mr. Cranage, is where it is!" concluded Miss Hepple, with a gentle smack of her hand on the table. "And I'm sufficiently inquisitive to admit that I wish I knew *what* it is!"

"So do I!" said Peggie. "Another big diamond, I should think."

I considered matters for awhile, silently.

"I daresay you're quite right in all you've said, ma'am," I remarked at last, turning to Miss Hepple. "And I think I'm right in saying that the best and the first thing for me to do is to tell Lady Renardsmere all that I've told you to-night. Eh?"

"Of course!" they replied, together. "You can do nothing else. And—at once!"

"Then," I said, turning to Peggie. "You come with me! It isn't that I'm afraid of tackling her alone, but it will be better to have some—moral support."

"No!" answered Peggie. She pointed across the table. "Miss Hepple will go with you! She's the proper person—and just *the* person! When you've told your tale, Miss Hepple will point the moral to Lady Renardsmere. Take her!"

"Will you be so good, ma'am?" I asked.

"I'll go with you," answered Miss Hepple, with something very like alacrity. "We'll go straight

there after breakfast. And in the meantime, as it's half-past three o'clock, I suggest that we go to bed. Come with me, Mr. Cranage, and I'll put you in the Blue Room."

I slept soundly for the remainder of that night, at any rate. Something in Miss Hepple's calm and commonsense view of things had pulled me together, and I had no visions of Holliment nor dreams of Quaterwayne. And when we all met at breakfast, at nine o'clock, I was grimly determined to have things out with Lady Renardsmere—supported by Miss Hepple—and to impress on her the danger in which we all stood who are mixed up in any way with the theft of that infernal Something!—whatever it was.

"Why have these detective chaps—private or otherwise—been shoved on you?" I asked of Peggie, seeing one of them crossing the grounds with Bradgett. "Lady Renardsmere's idea, of course?"

"Of course!" she answered. "She never even consulted me—merely sent me word that henceforth, right up to Derby Day, these two men would be here, one for day duty, the other for night, and that Rippling Ruby was to be watched night and day."

"Does she fear any interference?" I asked.

"Don't know what she fears, or thinks, or anything!" said Peggie. "I'll take care there's no interference! Lord!—as if Bradgett and I haven't kept a perpetual watch on the filly for long months!

No, I don't know what her idea is. What I do know is something else."

"What?" I asked.

Peggie involuntarily lowered her voice.

"I hear things!" she murmured. "So does Bradgett. Lady Renardsmere is backing Rippling Ruby no end! Backing her to win a perfect fortune! I hear that there's scarcely a principal bookmaker that she hasn't done business with. Colossal business!—never been anything like it!"

"Well, you say Rippling Ruby's dead certain to win?" I said, "so——"

"I'm as dead certain of that as a mortal can be certain about anything!" she answered quickly. "If there is anything that can beat her, it'll win—but I don't believe there is! I believe she'll win in a common canter—I'd plank my last penny—no, that's nothing!—I mean, I'd put down everything I've got, money, house, land, on her, and never have a second's fear. But I don't bet. And——"

"Well?" I asked, after she had paused awhile. "What?"

"There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," she quoted, with a shake of the head. "You never can tell, after all. What I say is that granted all goes right Rippling Ruby will win the Derby as sure as my name's Peggie Manson!"

"In which case Lady Renardsmere will——"

"Rake in another mountain of money!" she said, quickly. "Queer woman! Well—mind you two

stand up to her about this business!—impress her with its dangers.”

“I’m glad Miss Hepple’s going with me,” said I. “Glad isn’t the word, though! I’m intensely grateful—and relieved. Lady Renardsmere isn’t exactly the sort of person to tackle when a queer affair like this turns up.”

Presently Miss Hepple and I set out. We discussed Lady Renardsmere as we crossed the valley and made for the house.

“There’s a certain thing you’ve got to understand about Lady Renardsmere in relation to this matter, Mr. Cranage,” said my companion as we approached the grounds. “I told you early this morning that in my opinion that some precious stone was at the bottom of all this, and that Lady Renardsmere had no doubt acquired it from Neamore. Now I’ll tell you something that’s well known—Lady Renardsmere is superstitious about precious stones, to the very last degree of superstition! And if she’s got hold of this, and has some strange superstition about it, heaven and earth may be moved in the attempt, but nothing will get it out of her!”

“Not even the fear of murder?” I exclaimed.

“I don’t think she knows what fear is,” said Miss Hepple. “She’s utterly indifferent to all that sort of thing. Still—to use a slang phrase—pile it on when you tell her of all you saw in London.”

We found Lady Renardsmere in her business room. She seemed much surprised to see Miss

Hepple, but on my immediately explaining that Miss Hepple had come there at my particular request, to speak to her on my behalf, she became unusually amiable and expressed not only willingness but curiosity to know what it was all about.

"Shut the door, then, Cranage, and sit you both down and go ahead!" she said. "I was going digging, but it'll wait. What's it all about, my lad?"

I told her. It took just an hour and twenty minutes to tell—by the clock. She behaved beautifully. There was a box of cigarettes—strong, black, rank things that she imported from somewhere—and she smoked one after another, listening attentively. And when I'd finished she nodded, as if with great approval.

"Very well put, my boy!" she said. "Neat, precise, concise, well arranged!—I don't know but what you ought to have been a barrister. We'll have a talk about that, Cranage, for you're still a child. But now—what do you want me to say?"

For the life of me, when it came to it, I didn't know what I wanted her to say.

"I—I wanted you to know everything, Lady Renardsmere," I stammered.

"Well, now I know," she said. "And—I don't mind saying that I did buy something from those three men, believing they'd a right to sell it."

"What was it?" I asked unthinkingly.

"That's my business, my boy!" she retorted. "I

can be as close as your Mr. Cheng on that point. I'm not going to tell anybody!"

"In that case," said I, "these chaps—for, there must be more than one, with Chuh Sin as centre-point and inspirer—these chaps, Lady Renardsmere, will go for every single one of us that's been connected with the affair, and we may as well prepare to have our throats slit!"

"Cheerful!" she said, with a satirical laugh. "But I'm not a bit impressed, Cranage, I'm not afraid!"

"I'm horribly afraid!" I retorted, with emphasis. "And I'm not ashamed to say so, either! If you'd seen what I've seen, Lady Renardsmere, you—well, I think you'd throw that thing, whatever it may be, into the nearest ditch!"

She smiled, in her queer grim fashion, and glanced at my companion, till then silent.

"According to you, my lad," she said, "if I did, they'd only cut my throat to make me tell which ditch I'd thrown it into! But come!—what's Miss Hepple got to say about it? You're one of those eminently sensible women, Miss Hepple, aren't you?"

"I should like to have a few words with you in private, Lady Renardsmere," said Miss Hepple. "I'm sure Mr. Cranage won't mind?—he knows me by this time."

I left them together and went out on the terrace. Miss Hepple remained with Lady Renardsmere a long time. When she came out she gave me a reassuring look.

"We've had a talk," she said. "I think she'll be able to settle matters—satisfactorily. If I were you, I should say no more, and do no more. Let the police follow their own methods—you keep quiet. Don't bother yourself. She's no fear! Let things go on—as usual."

She went off, with another reassuring nod. Lady Renardsmere came out.

"You didn't say a word to the police about me, Cranage?" she said. "No? That's right, my boy! Now then, just settle down. It's no affair of yours, anyhow."

I settled down—after a fashion. Three days went by. Nothing happened. Then, on the fourth morning after my return, I opened the newspaper and read that Neamore had been murdered, in Kensington Gardens, in broad daylight, about three o'clock on the previous afternoon.

CHAPTER XIV

THE THIRD MURDER

BECAUSE of the out-of-the-way situation of Renardsmere House, the daily newspapers rarely arrived there before noon, that morning they were a little late, and when they came Lady Renardsmere had gone out—to Manson Lodge, in her pony-phæton. So there I sat, with the papers and that awful news before me, with nobody to talk to about it, and wondering what was going to happen next.

That was the third murder within a week! Was there to be a fourth?

There was not much about it in the papers. Lady Renardsmere took in three dailies and a couple of sporting dailies: the accounts in the dailies seemed so much alike that I concluded they had been supplied by one of the news agencies: indeed, the wording in each was similar——

“An extraordinarily desperate murder, of a character closely resembling the recent murders in Maida Vale, and near St. Katharine’s Docks, was committed about three o’clock yesterday afternoon

in Kensington Gardens. The victim has been identified as Mr. Percy Neamore, a commission agent, of Ashmore Road, Paddington. Mr. Neamore appears to have been attacked in a quiet part of the gardens and stabbed to death. His clothing had been searched and cut to pieces in the fashion already familiar in the two murders referred to above, and that a quest for some object and not robbery of money or valuables was the murderer or murderers' motive is evidenced by the fact that a considerable sum in Bank of England notes, some fine diamond rings, and a gold watch and chain remained on the dead man. As far as the police are aware, no one witnessed any attack or scuffle, and at present there is no clue. What appears to be plain is that this is the third of the series of murders which began with that of the man Holliment in Blomfield Road, a week ago. Great activity is being shown at Scotland Yard, but its officials are unusually reticent."

I read and reread that, staring at it as if I were fascinated. And all the time there was ding-donging in my brain, over and over, and over again the question—who next?—who next?—who next? The fact was, my nerve was giving way, and it was little wonder that I jumped violently when a sudden knock sounded on my door.

A footman entered. He gave me a curious, side-long glance.

"Two gentlemen asking for you, sir," he an-

nounced. "They won't give any names—one said you'd know him when you saw him."

I hurried out. Jifferdene!—as I had already guessed. With him, another man, a stranger, but obviously of Jifferdene's profession.

"Come in!" said I, and ushered them into my room, pointing them to chairs near my desk, on which one of the papers lay outspread. I pointed to the big letters announcing the murder. "I've read it!" I observed, nodding at Jifferdene. "That's the third! My God!—how long is it going on?"

Without answering that he waved a hand towards his companion.

"My friend—and associate—Detective-Sergeant Beacher," he said.

Beacher and I exchanged nods. But I was not interested in Beacher—just then, and I turned on Jifferdene.

"What have you come here for?" I demanded, querulously, I daresay. "I thought I wasn't wanted until——"

"Haven't said I wanted you, yet!" interrupted Jifferdene, good-humouredly. "Don't you let yourself get upset, Mr. Cranage—that'll do no good. You're a bit nervy, aren't you, now?"

"Who wouldn't be?" I retorted. "After all this—and now another——"

"Well, well, it can't go on for ever!" he said, philosophically, "but listen!—is Lady Renardsmere anywhere about?"

"She isn't!" I said. "Lady Renardsmere has gone over to Chilverton Downs, to Miss Manson's stables. I don't know when she'll be back. She may stay to lunch there. But—you don't want her?"

"That's just what we do want!" answered Jif-ferdene, coolly. "That's what we've come down from town for. We must see Lady Renardsmere if we have to wait all the afternoon for her."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Because her name's come into this business," he replied promptly. "That's why!"

"How has her name come into this business?" I asked, "and since when?"

"I'll tell you," he said. "There was no trouble about identifying this man Neamore—he had cards on him, and also he was personally identified within half-an-hour of being found. So his name appeared, d'ye see, in last evening's papers. Well, lateish last night, a gentleman—man about town, and very familiar with the West End—came to headquarters and gave us some queer news. He said about a week or so ago, he was lunching at the Ritz one day, and he saw Neamore, whom he knew as a turf commission agent in a small way of business, lunching with Lady Renardsmere and two other men, whom, from his description of them, I believe to have been Holli-ment and Quartervayne. Queer sort of company for her ladyship, eh, Mr. Cranage?"

"You know very well that you do get mixed up with queer company in relation to turf matters," I

said. "Lady Renardsmere, as you're aware, is an owner, and she probably had business with these men."

"Every single man-jack of whom has been done in, since!" he remarked, with a grim look at his companion. "All right, Mr. Cranage! But we want to know what Lady Renardsmere knew about Neamore, and what she was doing there at the Ritz with him and the other two—we want to know everything!"

"Lady Renardsmere is a very masterful and arbitrary woman," I said. "She'll probably tell you to mind your own business! If she had business—racing business—with them, why shouldn't she lunch with these three men? What's that got to do with their being murdered—afterwards? I suppose you agree there's such a thing as coincidence?"

"Ain't had any dealings with it in my career!" he answered, sardonically. "However, I daresay Lady Renardsmere can tell us a bit. We'll wait for her, anyway. There's no denying the fact that she knew Neamore. And Neamore is done in!"

"I suppose you know all the particulars?" I suggested. "Was—was it like the other affairs?"

"Like and unlike," answered Jifferdene. "For calm, cool, daring impudence, as a murder, I should think it never was equalled! Beacher and I, we were talking about it coming down, and we agreed that we'd never heard of anything like it. Broad daylight!"

"Public park, too!" muttered Beacher. "Kensington Gardens! Incredible, I call it! And yet—done! No getting over that."

"How was it?" I asked.

Jifferdene settled himself more comfortably in his easy chair.

"Well," he said, "of course, you know Kensington Gardens? You know where the Lancaster Gate entrance is, on the top side, near the Fountains? Know it all well enough, eh?—very well, then you'll know that between Lancaster Gate and the Round Pond there are paths and roadways, and that between them there are stretches of turf, and trees, and here and there shrubberies. You'll know, too, that there are chairs about, under the trees, and so on for which you pay a copper or so —"

"I know Kensington Gardens and all about it as well as any man living!" I interrupted. "Used to live close by!"

"Well," he continued, "that simplifies things. About twenty minutes to four yesterday afternoon, a man who was collecting copper for the chairs was passing across a stretch of turf, about half-way between Lancaster Gate and the Round Pond, when he noticed a man who was sitting in a peculiar attitude at the foot of a beech tree—one of a little grove of trees in a quiet spot. The attitude was so peculiar—propped up against the trunk, with arms outstretched—that he went up to him. He at once

saw that the man was dead, and he hurried to get assistance.

"The first notion of the police when they arrived was that it was a case of suicide, but they soon saw that it was one of murder. A card case, found in the man's waistcoat pocket, revealed his identity—but that was still further and more definitely established a few minutes later. Before the police could remove the body, a young woman appeared on the scene, who said that the dead man was a friend of hers, that she'd made an appointment to meet him thereabouts at four o'clock, and who gave his name, address, and occupation. So of course there's no doubt whatever about his identity. And I may tell you Mr. Cranage, that last evening I fetched that landlord from the Warrington Hotel in Maida Vale, and he identified him as the young fellow who'd been in his house with Holliment. There's no doubt about that, either!—nor that Neamore, Holliment, and Quartermayne had been, a couple of days previously, with Lady Renardsmere at the Ritz Hotel."

"Tell him of that second reason why we want Lady Renardsmere," suggested Beacher, who seemed to be a silent sort of man.

"Aye, just so!" responded Jifferdene. He glanced at the door as if to assure himself that it was shut, and turned to me with one of his confidential winks. "You know, Mr. Cranage, that in the other cases there were certain similar features? Well, they were present again here! To be sure, this time, as

in Quatertervayne's case they'd taken whatever cash, gold and silver, Neamore had on him. But they'd left untouched a wad of bank-notes, representing several hundred pounds, a gold watch and chain, two or three diamond rings, and a diamond scarf pin—he was a dressy man, poor fellow! That they'd been on the search again was proved by the fact that they'd ripped his coat to rags at the shoulders—and so on, just as in the other cases. However, we think they got something, this time.”

“What?” I exclaimed.

“Well,” he answered, “there was a small leather box, velvet-lined, lying in the grass close by, empty. It had evidently contained something which the murderer had extracted before throwing the case aside. And there was a pocket-book, a rather big one, thrown aside, also empty. Now this young woman who came up, and who knew Neamore well, says that he always carried a lot of papers in that pocket-book—it wasn't really so much a pocket-book as a letter-case. She says that she'd often seen Neamore pull it out, and consult papers in it, and that it was always bursting with papers. Well, there wasn't a paper in it, nor on him! They'd taken the lot!”

“Well?” I said, as he paused, looking significantly at me. “What's your notion about that, Jifferdene?”

“We think it highly probable, considering our knowledge of the fact that Lady Renardsmere un-

doubtedly knew Neamore, that these fellows, whoever they may be, have got her name and address from these stolen papers," he answered. "In addition to wanting to get some information from Lady Renardsmere, we want to warn her. This lot, Mr. Cranage, it's very evident, will stop at nothing—until we get hold of 'em!"

"Perhaps Mr. Cranage can tell us something about Lady Renardsmere and Neamore?" observed Beacher, giving me a questioning glance. "I suppose he'll know——"

"You forget—or you don't know—that I've only been in Lady Renardsmere's employment a very short time," I answered, more determined than ever not to commit myself. "You must ask questions of her."

"Strong-minded party, ain't she?" suggested Jif-ferdene. "I've heard so. Bit eccentric, too, I've heard that. However—we've got to be listened to, eh, Beacher?"

"I believe you!" asserted Beacher, with conviction, "not half!"

Lady Renardsmere presently came back. I left the detectives in my room, and went to her. She held up a hand as soon as she saw me.

"I've heard all about it, Cranage!" she exclaimed. "I saw a newspaper at Peggie Manson's. And I'm not going to discuss it! You're safe here, and——"

"It's not that, Lady Renardsmere, and I wasn't going to say anything about my own safety," I re-

torted, feeling rather nettled by her tone. "I'll contrive to safeguard myself, as far as I can, somehow. But that's not why I came in. There are two men here, waiting in my room, who want to see you."

A portentous frown gathered on the old lady's face.

"Men? To see me?" she exclaimed. "What men?"

"Scotland Yard men—detectives," I answered, brusquely, and keeping a sharp eye on her. "I know one, Detective-Sergeant Jifferdene."

"What do they want with me?" she demanded angrily. "Who sent them? You haven't said anything, Cranage? You said the other day that you hadn't! You know what I mean?—about Neamore coming here? You haven't mentioned that—or me—to any of these people?"

"I haven't said one word about you or Neamore to any of them, Lady Renardsmere!" I replied. "I told you I hadn't. I think that their visit—from what they've said to me—arises out of yesterday's affair, out of Neamore's murder. They know something. They know, for instance," I continued, watching her narrowly, "that you lunched with Neamore, Holliment, and Quartervayne at the Ritz Hotel about a week or so ago."

That told. She stared at me, almost incredulously, for a full minute.

"How do they know that?" she exclaimed.

"I suppose a great many people know you, Lady Renardsmere," I said. "Your town house, in Park

Lane, isn't so very far away from the Ritz, is it? I imagine that somebody who knows you saw you at the Ritz with these men and, when enquiries began to be made after the murder of Neamore yesterday, told the detectives. These things come out."

She suddenly lifted her hand and pointed to the door which I had left slightly open.

"Shut it!" she said, peremptorily. "Sit down, Cranage. Now then, my lad, what do these fellows want?"

"I think they want to ask you some questions, Lady Renardsmere," I replied. "About what you knew of Neamore—and the other two."

"Have they told you anything?" she asked. "I mean—since they came here, this morning?"

"About Neamore's murder, a good deal," I answered. "The circumstances——"

She waved her hand impatiently.

"No—no!" she exclaimed. "I don't care a hang about Neamore's murder, not I—nor the others, either. I mean—about me?"

"I don't know that they know anything about you," I said, "other, that is, than that you were with these three men at the Ritz. They want information, Lady Renardsmere!—they're working up their case."

She sat silent for a while, drumming her fingers on the desk before her.

"What time did they come?" she asked suddenly.

"About half-past twelve," I replied.

"And it's now nearly two—lunch time," she said.
"Have they had anything?"

"Nothing!" said I.

"Hand them over to Burton, Cranage, and tell him to give them lunch," she commanded. "Tell him to look well after them—I know what those fellows like. See that they have anything they fancy in the way of drinks—cigars, too. Afterwards—I'll see about it."

I went back to Jifferdene and Beacher and without committing myself to any engagement on Lady Renardsmere's behalf, invited them to lunch, and carried them off to the butler, who presently installed them in a quiet little room, and—after my whispered and particular instructions—proceeded to serve them with very generous hospitality.

"Lady Renardsmere," I said, as I left them, "hopes that you will consider yourselves at home and enjoy yourselves—I'll see you after a while."

I lunched, as usual, in my own room, wondering what was going to come of all this. Would Lady Renardsmere tell these two men anything? I knew well enough by that time what a queer, masterful woman she was, and what difficulty anybody would have in extracting information from her that she didn't care to give. To me the question was—what was the precise nature of her transactions with the three men who, almost immediately afterwards, had each been brutally murdered. Would she tell?

At three o'clock, I went down to the two detec-

tives. They had evidently done themselves very well, indeed, in every way, and between the last whiffs of a choice Partugas, Jifferdene voiced their joint warm sense of Lady Renardsmere's lavish hospitality.

"But it's getting on, Mr. Cranage," he concluded, pulling out his watch. "We want to be getting back to town. When will her ladyship see us?"

"I'll see about it," I answered. "I'll enquire now."

Outside, in the lower hall, I found Burton. He drew me aside, with a knowing look.

"Her Ladyship's gone, Mr. Cranage," he whispered. "Gone a good hour ago—with her maid. I don't know where she's gone—I should say to town. Walker took 'em from the garden entrance, quietly—no luggage. And she left a message for you with me—there's no need for those two gentlemen to wait—she's nothing whatever to say to them!"

CHAPTER XV

THE AMERICAN TOURIST

THE butler and I looked at each other. He was an old and very confidential servant, and withal a dependable and sensible man. There was a limp silence between us then, probably realising that I was very young and he himself becoming elderly, he spoke, glancing around us as if to suggest secrecy.

"I imagine that all this"—he waved a hand in the direction of the room in which Jifferdene and Beacher were still lingering over their cigars—"all this, Mr. Cranage, is on account of that Neamore affair? Those two—in there—they're detectives, of course! I spotted 'em, Mr. Cranage, at once!"

"What do you know about the Neamore affair, Burton?" I asked.

"I've seen the newspapers this morning, sir, as most people have!" he replied, "and of course I remember this Neamore coming here the other day—I saw his card before it was taken in to you—and her ladyship carrying him off in her car. And now he's murdered!—and quick on the murder, these two men come here! And—her ladyship won't see 'em."

"You know Lady Renardsmere well enough, Burton, to know that nobody and nothing can make her do what she doesn't want to do," I said. "If she says that she's nothing whatever to say to these two—well, there you are! But did she leave no other message?—no message for me?"

"Nothing but what I've told you of, Mr. Cranage," he answered.

"And—no instructions?—for you?" I suggested. He shook his head, smiling to himself.

"Then—she'll probably be back to-night, especially as she took no luggage?" I said. "Just ran up to town for a few hours, eh?"

Again he smiled—enigmatically.

"If you'd known her ladyship as long as I have, Mr. Cranage," he answered, "you'd know that you never can argue anything from anything she does. I've known her set off to America at ten minutes' notice, and to Paris at five, I attach no importance to her going from here without luggage—there are always trunks already packed for any journey at the house in Park Lane, and she's nothing to do but call for 'em. You never know what she's going to do—but in this case I do think she's off for a while, or she wouldn't have taken Mam'selle Felicia with her. Luggage?—Lor' bless you, Mr. Cranage!—I've known her set off to Italy in the one gown she stood up in, and rig herself out with whatever she and the maid wanted as they went along!—a woman with her unlimited command of money can do anything!"

"And—in such instances—she leaves you to look after everything, with no special orders?" I asked.

"Precisely, sir! There never are any special orders," he replied. "This house, Mr. Cranage, and the house in Park Lane, too, are both kept up and staffed so that her ladyship can walk into either of 'em at any hour of day or night and find everything going on as if she never left 'em! Oh, I know what to do even if she never came back for six months!"

"What?" I asked, anxious to apply his method to myself.

"Go on just as usual," he answered coolly. "Always be ready for her to walk in—which she will do, sooner or later, without any warning, and just as if she'd never gone out. And if I were you, Mr. Cranage, I should do the same. It's what she likes—which is the main thing."

"Well," said I. "I suppose so—but just now I must get rid of these men. They won't be pleased, Burton!"

"I daresay!" he asserted, with a knowing look. "But—I don't think that would bother her ladyship."

I went off—slowly and thoughtfully—to the little parlour wherein the two detectives were awaiting me. I saw at once that Jifferdene was getting impatient. So I went straight to the point.

"I'm very sorry," I said bluntly, "but Lady Renardsmere declines to see you. She has nothing whatever to say."

I don't know whether it was that Jifferdene felt that he represented the Majesty of the Law, and that this curt announcement outraged it, but he turned very red and got on to his feet.

"Declines?" he said questioningly. "Nothing to say? Did—did you tell her who we were, Mr. Cranage, and where from?"

"Both!" I replied. "She knows all that, well enough. That goes nowhere—with her!"

"Oh!" he exclaimed, and exchanged a look with his companion. Then he turned again to me. "Come, Mr. Cranage!" he said, "this is all very well! We've got to see her."

"That's impossible," I answered, smiling at him. "Lady Renardsmere left here an hour ago."

His mouth opened and he stared at me incredulously.

"Left? An hour ago?" he exclaimed at last. "Did you know?"

"Knew nothing about it, Jifferdene, until just now," I answered. "Then, the butler told me. She left a message. There was no need for you to wait longer—she had nothing whatever to say."

Jifferdene turned to a corner and picked up his hat and umbrella. It was evident that he was very angry: too angry to speak just then. But Beacher spoke. He laughed, too—as if he were amused.

"Done us!" he said.

"And done herself no good!" growled Jifferdene.

"A very foolish thing on her part, Mr. Cranage, to run away like that."

"I don't know that it was running away," I remarked. "Lady Renardsmere is not the woman to run away from anything. I suppose it's just that she's not inclined to talk."

"She'll have to talk if she's put in a witness-box under a subpoena!" muttered Jifferdene. "She knows more than you think! Well, we'll be getting back to that station, Beacher,—wasted a whole day! Where's she gone?" he demanded, suddenly turning on me as he was leaving the room. "She's a big palace in Park Lane—I know it! Has she gone there?"

"No more idea than you have," I replied. "Nor has anybody in this house, Jifferdene. Lady Renardsmere never tells anybody anything about her movements."

"We shall go to Park Lane to-night," he said firmly. "If she isn't there, then I shall know very well that she's hooked it!—to keep out of the way."

"I hope you enjoyed your lunch, anyway?" I said, as I showed them out.

"Takes all the nice taste of it away, this has, Mr. Cranage," he replied, sullenly. "I think her ladyship's treated us badly! A few questions . . . However . . ."

He marched off, followed by Beacher, who seemed inclined to take things much more easily and philosophically, and I returned to my own room, and

wondered what I should do with myself in the event of Lady Renardsmere remaining away for some time—as I suspected she would. Upon reflection, I decided to do just what Burton said he always did—go on as usual. There was always plenty of correspondence which I myself attended to without ever showing it to Lady Renardsmere; there were other duties, too, within my province which didn't require her supervision. And . . . there was Peggie, across the valley: I was beginning to adore Peggie, without exactly falling in love with her.

The consideration of these matters suddenly reminded me that the visit of the detectives had interrupted my day's work—I had still several letters to write. So, the afternoon being now at its middle, I set to work on them, and I had got about half through my task when a footman entered, bringing a card.

"Gentleman in the hall, sir, wanting to see the house," he said as he laid the card before me, "I told him it wasn't one of the days, but he said that he's only on his way through the neighbourhood, touring, and won't ever be this way again, so perhaps you'd kindly make an exception in his case?"

Renardsmere House was a show-place—and no wonder, for it was a veritable treasury of works of art, ancient and modern: the late Sir William Renardsmere had been a famous collector in his time, and while there was much of his gatherings in the big mansion in Park Lane, the greater and

more important part was housed here on the Downs. And on three days a week, Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Lady Renardsmere admitted the public to see these things, between the hours of three and six in the afternoon—on payment of a shilling a head, which shilling, with its fellows, went to a deserving charity. But this was neither Friday, Wednesday nor Monday.

However, in view of what the footman had said, I glanced at the card which lay before me. It was a beautiful card, and beautifully engraved, and wholly and entirely un-English.

ELMER C. PEYTON.

85 23rd Street,
Milwaukee, Wis.

Having a sneaking affection for Americans, and a desire to improve my acquaintance with them, I went out into the hall. There, swinging a Panama hat in his hand, and looking about him with an air of frank, undisguised curiosity, stood a young fellow of about my own age. He was what they call a hefty chap—well above medium height, with the torso of a prize-fighter, and a general appearance of mighty muscular strength. He suggested fresh air and sunlight, too; his face was bronzed almost

to copper colour, his eyes were clear as pools of fresh water; candid, too, they were, and looked straight at you. The sort of ingenuous youth who wants to make friends at once, he shoved out a big right hand as I walked up to him, and as the sleeve of his tweed jacket was unusually short, and he wore no cuffs to his flannel shirt, I noticed that on his wrist, tattooed in more colours than one, there was a design which, later on, I saw to be some sort of a dragon.

He began to make some apology, but I cut him short.

"This is not one of the specified days, Mr. Peyton," I said, "but I think we can make an exception in your case. You are just passing this way?"

"I'm wheeling between Winchester and Chichester," he answered, speaking without the least trace of what English folk fondly believe to be distinctive American accent, "and I stopped to get some lunch at the inn in the village below. The landlord told me of the pictures and things that are to be seen here, and he said that though it was not one of the days set down in the guidebook, he felt sure ____"

"Just so!" said I. "As you have come such a long way—though not, of course, with Renardsmere House solely in your eye——"

"I never heard of it till an hour ago," he broke in, with evident simplicity. "I'm just touring in England—came down from Liverpool through Ches-

ter, Shrewsbury, Warwick, Stratford, Oxford, Reading, Winchester, turning aside here and there—I like to get in all that I can. Architecture, pictures, anything like that——”

“Artistic tastes, eh?” I said. “Very well—I’ll show you round.”

He thanked me very politely—all through, he was a very polite, well-mannered person—and observed, as I led him up the great staircase to the various galleries and state rooms that all this sort of thing was absolutely new to him, and that I had no idea how he enjoyed it.

“But I think you have a few millionaires—who are also big collectors—in your own country, haven’t you?” I said, with a sly laugh. “Some of them are pretty keen about removing some of our most cherished possessions across the Atlantic, too!”

“Cherished?” he retorted, with an uplifted eyebrow. “You can’t call them cherished, I think, if you let them go! If you cherish them so much, why don’t you outbid the fellows who come across to buy them?”

“Ask me another!” I answered. “You see, the average Briton thinks more of salmon at seven shillings a pound than he does of a book of sonnets at half the price, and he’d rather lay out thirty thousand pounds on drains and sewage than on keeping a Velasquez or a Rembrandt in the country. However, I think all we’ve got here isn’t likely to be

carried off as long as Lady Renardsmere lives."

"Very rich woman, I suppose?" he enquired.

As everybody knew that Lady Renardsmere was unusually wealthy I did not consider myself to be breaking any confidence in admitting that she was. But I added that the things which we were now beginning to inspect had been brought together by her late husband, Sir William Renardsmere.

"Lady Renardsmere," I remarked, "was in her time a very well-known, indeed, a famous actress. She was known in your country, too—I believe she'd quite a triumph there."

"That's interesting!" he exclaimed. "What was her stage name?"

I told him, and he nodded as though to assert that he knew the name well enough.

"That's a long way back, though," he remarked. "That would be in the 'eighties. And she's alive, and this is her house? Well, now, that's something to tell! Is there any chance of seeing her?"

"I'm afraid not," I said, laughing at his eagerness. "Lady Renardsmere isn't at home."

"Will she be long away?" he asked. "I'd hang round this village a day or two, to say I'd seen her!"

"I shouldn't advise you to," said I. "She may be away some time. But I can show you a portrait of her, painted by Millais, when she was at the height of her fame and her beauty: we'll come to it presently."

He appeared to be greatly enraptured by the

portrait—so much so that I hastened to tell him that it was forty years since it was painted and that Lady Renardsmere had changed so greatly in that time that there were few traces left of her former beauty.

“And since she came into possession of all this,” he asked, waving the tattooed hand round the gallery in which we stood, “these priceless pictures, these cabinets of rarities, and all the rest of it, does she add to it—is she too, a collector?”

I was so sure of my visitor’s bona fide, so completely seduced by his appearance of youthful innocence and his ingenuous air that I answered without thinking.

“Lady Renardsmere collects precious stones,” I said. “I believe she’s one of the most wonderful collections in the world.”

“Are these shown?” he asked, with simplicity.

“No, no!” I answered. “That wouldn’t do! She keeps them under lock and key. of course. Otherwise——”

“Just so!” he said. “There’s a man with whose son I was at College—Cyrus P. Warrill, a rich man of Chicago—he goes in for that sort of thing. He has a diamond necklace that belonged to Catherine the Great, and some pearl ornament that was once the property of one of the French Queens—I don’t know which. I suppose that’s the sort of thing your Lady Renardsmere likes to acquire?—things with historical interest attaching to them?”

"Can't say," I replied. "I've never seen any of Lady Renardsmere's possessions of that sort."

"Well, there's a lot to look at here," he remarked. "And whatever you may say about things being carried over to our country, it strikes me since I came to yours that there are accumulations in these old English mansions and castles and halls that you'll not find anywhere in the world! You've had a long start!"

In this sort of light conversation, I passed a couple of hours with him, and then, wishing to be hospitable to the stranger within our gates, gave him some tea before he went. Finally I saw him off on his bicycle—his one regret being that he hadn't been able to see Lady Renardsmere so that he might have told her that he had heard his mother speak of her acting. We parted very good friends, and he waved the tattooed wrist at me as he sped down the drive.

Walker came back that night with the car—late. He came to see me—with a message. But it was not at all the sort of message I had expected. It was merely to say that while Lady Renardsmere was away I was to have Walker's services and any of the cars in the garage whenever I wanted them. Nothing more. I asked Walker a question or two—he had taken Lady Renardsmere and her maid, Felicia, to the house in Park Lane and left them there: that was all he knew. I wondered then if Jifferdene and Beacher had descended on Lady Renardsmere that night after getting back to Lon-

don? But first thing next morning I knew that she had not stopped in London: she had evidently gone to Park Lane to get whatever she needed and had then travelled onward. For just as I sat down to breakfast I got a wire from her which had been handed in at Dover the night before. It was of no importance: it merely desired me to deal with all correspondence during her absence—but it showed me, being from Dover, that Lady Renardsmere was on her way to the Continent.

I had to go down to the village that morning, and there, near his inn, I met Holroyd, the landlord, and stopped to speak to him.

“That was a very pleasant young fellow you sent up yesterday afternoon, Holroyd,” I said. “It wasn’t one of our show days, you know, but I took him round.”

Holroyd stared at me.

“That I sent up, Mr. Cranage?” he exclaimed. “Never sent anybody up!”

“A young American—a cyclist?” I said. “Don’t you remember? He had lunch at your place.”

“Nobody had lunch at my place yesterday!” he declared, still staring. “American? No Americans here!—I know Americans when I see ’em—been there, three times. No cyclists here yesterday, either. Somebody’s been having you, Mr. Cranage. I never sent up anybody to Renardsmere House!”

I went off at that, silent and wondering. What had my visitor wanted?—been after?

CHAPTER XVI

THE ADMIRAL'S FOLLY

BUT before I had gone many yards, Holroyd called me back. He came to meet me, eyeing me with a shrewd glance that seemed to mean a good deal.

"That appears to have knocked you all of a heap, Mr. Cranage," he said, smiling. "Taken aback, what?"

"Well—" I said. "I'm a bit puzzled, Holroyd. Certainly a young man came up to the house yesterday afternoon, who said that he was an American tourist on his way from Winchester to Chichester, that he'd been lunching at the village inn, and that hearing of the art treasures of Renardsmere House he'd come to see them, at the landlord's suggestion. And there's no other inn than yours in the village."

"No—nor for four or five miles on either or any side of it," he sneered. "But no American tourist nor anybody answering your description came here yesterday: I remember every man Jack that came in, and there was nobody of that sort. You've been had, Mr. Cranage!—that's been some fellow that wanted to get into Renardsmere House for purposes of his own."

I, too, was beginning to think that—I was beginning to remember also that I had been a bit unguarded in talking to the stranger about Lady Renardsmere's love of precious stones. But Holroyd was speaking again.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Cranage," he said. "There's been some strange folk—men—about here lately. I've had one or two strangers in here that I didn't know, and couldn't account for. We don't get commercial travellers here in Renardsmere—nothing for 'em to come for. A brewers' traveller, of course—now and then—but we know him. But there have been men—and I'll tell you what I think. They're after news—of any sort—about that filly of Lady Renardsmere's—*Rippling Ruby*. That's the game, sir!"

"There are men up there—private detectives—who are keeping strict watch over Miss Manson's training place," I said.

"Aye, but I know them!" he answered, shaking his head. "Two of 'em—Robindale and Williamson. They come down here, now and then—never together, of course, because when one's off t'other's on. But I don't mean them. I've once or twice had strangers in—and in this out-of-the-way spot, we don't see many strangers. There was a man came in the other night—very late. What's a stranger doing round here, miles from any town, miles from the nearest station, at just before ten o'clock. And—you can't ask."

"They may have been what you say," I said. "I suppose there are people who want to get all the information they can about a Derby candidate?"

"I should say there are!" he answered, with an ironic laugh at my evident ignorance. "Aye, and 'ud sacrifice their own mothers to get it! And there are those too, who'd move heaven and earth, and hell an' all, to get at something else—if they could!"

"What?" I asked.

"Why, the filly herself," he said, with another laugh. "There's some queer things done in connection with the Turf, Mr. Cranage! Lady Renardsmere's doing the right thing in having Rippling Ruby carefully watched—if she were mine, I'd take good care that human eyes were never off her till she faces the starting-gate! There'll be plenty on her then, to be sure!—but she'll be safe."

Presently I left him and went up the hillside to Peggie Manson's. I met Peggie in the grounds of her home: one glance at her showed me that she was in a by-no-means-good temper. And as soon as she caught sight of me, she snapped out a question.

"Have you had a telegram from Lady Renardsmere this morning?" she demanded.

"I have!" said I. "I suppose you have, too?"

"Why do you suppose it?" she retorted.

"Because I can see you're not in a very angelic mood," I replied. "What's the matter?"

She stared at me for a moment, then she slashed

off the head of an unoffending dandelion with the hunting-crop which was rarely out of her hand.

"I do wish Lady Renardsmere wouldn't do things without consulting me," she exclaimed angrily. "Really, I might be a servant of hers! Besides, she never thinks of the bother she causes by her high-handed way of doing things!"

"I'm still waiting to know what she's done," I said.

"Done? Planted four more men on me!" she complained. "I got a wire from her first thing this morning, saying that four more of these private detectives would arrive to-day, and were to work under the two that are already here, and then giving more elaborate instructions about Rippling Ruby's safety. Ridiculous!—as if she wasn't as safe as safe can be!—trust me and Bradgett for that!"

"Oh, well, I don't know," I replied. "There are some queer things going on: I've just had an adventure myself—" and I went on to tell her about my visitor of the previous afternoon and of Holroyd's recent remarks. "What do you make of that?" I concluded.

"Nothing to do with Rippling Ruby!" she said, with decision. "But—I should say it's a good deal to do with the other affair. Probably that was one of the gang."

"You think so?" I said. "What!—to walk right in there?"

"Why not?" she replied. "He bluffed you, easily enough. Of course I'm right!—he came with the idea of seeing Lady Renardsmere and looking round her home."

"Why?" I asked, still wondering.

"Jim Cranage!" she exclaimed. "You're—dense! I shall have to sharpen you up. Why? Good heavens, child! Can't you see why?"

"Not yet!" I retorted.

"Why—because they've traced that Something to Lady Renardsmere!" she answered, with an expressive flash of her grey eyes. "I should think anybody possessed of one grain of perception can see that! They didn't get any satisfaction out of murdering Holliment, and probably no more out of murdering Quaterwayne, but I think that when they murdered Neamore they found evidence of his transactions with Lady Renardsmere. And now—they're after her."

"Well—she's off, anyway," I said, after a moment's reflections. "Where was your wire from?"

"Dover," she answered. "Handed in there late last night."

"So was mine," I said. "But there was nothing in mine, except to tell me to deal with the ordinary correspondence. Dover! Now—do you know what I think?"

"Not the ghost of an idea, my boy!" replied Peggie.

"I think Lady Renardsmere has hopped it to the

Continent in search of that deep and crafty old gentleman, Mr. Cheng," I said, trying to look very clever.

"Bless you!" exclaimed Peggie, satirically, "aren't you getting smart! But I thought that, before you. So did Aunt Millie Hepple. There!"

I suppose I looked properly crestfallen—so much so that, her mood changing to one of teasingness, she lifted her hunting-crop and began to poke me in the ribs with it.

"Cheer up!" she said. "Perhaps some day you'll think of something that nobody else has ever thought of! But seriously, you know——"

"Why don't you call me by my name, Peggie?" I interrupted, emboldened by the hunting crop. "Come, now?"

"Well, Jim, then!" she answered, with a half-provoking, half-shy laugh. "Seriously, Jim, anybody who knows Lady Renardsmere as thoroughly as Aunt Millie Hepple and I know her, would never have any doubt as to what she'd do in a situation of this sort. Without doubt, she bought something from Neamore. She's discovered that what she bought wasn't Neamore's to sell; that it was stolen property. But stolen property or not, it was something she wanted, or has taken a violent fancy to, and meant to stick to, by hook or by crook. Now Lady Renardsmere, being a millionaire, or, I believe, a multi-millionaire, what do you suppose she would do? Why—go straight off to the person to

whom this Something really does belong and strike a bargain with him! That's the reason of her sudden flight. She's gone after Mr. Cheng."

"Of course, she knew all about Cheng," I said musingly.

"Of course she knew!—you told her, before Aunt Millie," asserted Peggie. "She'll track Mr. Cheng, whether he's in Antwerp or Amsterdam, Brussels or Paris, and she'll get round him to sell her his rights in this mysterious thing she's already in possession of. And then she'll come home, triumphant."

"And perhaps get murdered on the way," I suggested.

"As regards that, Jim, her best plan would be to let the whole transaction be made public," she said. "If this gang knew that she'd acquired a legal right to the thing, they'd perhaps let their pursuit of it drop——"

"What!—after murdering three men in the hope of regaining possession of it?" I exclaimed. "I scarcely see that!"

"I don't know," she retorted. "I do. They knew that neither Holliment nor Quartervayne, nor Nea-more had any right to it, and so they went for each. But a legal right——"

"Legal quibbles are beyond me, Peggie," I interrupted. "What I'm wondering about is—what's the composition of this gang? The Chinaman whom we know as Chuh Sin must be one—leader and inspirer, no doubt. Who are the others? If this man who

called at Renardsmere House yesterday is another, I can easily identify him if need ever arises!"

"How?" she asked.

"He's got a very fine specimen of the art of tattooing on his wrist," I replied. "He wore his sleeves very short, and I'd a fine view of it. Clever, well-spoken, smart sort of chap, too—I'm sorry to think of him as being one of that lot."

"No sentiment, Jim, just now," she said, warningly. "Vermin are beautiful, sometimes, as creatures, but they want killing! That lot, as you call it——"

Just then the newspapers arrived, and we each seized on one and turned to the latest news of the Neamore affair. There was nothing new. The police authorities, according to what we read, were in a state of immense activity, but all their movements and doings were shrouded in impenetrable protections—suffice it to say that no stone was being left unturned, and that remarkable developments might be expected before very long.

I left Peggie to deal with the sudden demands made on her resources by the arrival of Rippling Ruby's new bodyguard, and went homeward to do my own work. Passing the Renardsmere Arms on my way, I was suddenly hailed by Holroyd, who put his head through the open window of the bar-parlour and called to me to stop. I went back to him.

"I find I made a mistake this morning, Mr. Cranage," he said with an apologetic laugh. "There was

a young fellow in here yesterday who might be an American—the one you mentioned. You sœe, me and my missus we were out for a couple of hours early yesterday afternoon, and my barman was in charge. I never knew till just now that such a chap as that you mentioned had been in. I knew nobody'd been for a regular, proper lunch—but a cyclist did come while we were out and had a bite of bread and cheese and a bottle of soda-water, if you call that lunch, and the barman told him about Renardsmere House and said he'd likely get in, though it wasn't a show-day. That'll be your man, Mr. Cranage. He no doubt took my barman for me—thought he was the landlord."

I was glad to hear it. Somehow or other, I had taken a fancy to my visitor, and had felt almost a personal regret at being forced to believe that he was a member of a murder gang. And though I never expected to see Mr. Elmer C. Peyton again, I went home greatly relieved.

That afternoon, Spiller, the Portsmouth detective, called to see me. He wanted some further information about the attack on Holliment's warehouse. When I had told him all I could, he began to talk about recent events. He had been up to town the day before, in connection with Quartervayne's murder. And he gave me some good news—good for me, at any rate. There would be no need whatever for my attendance at the inquest on Quartervayne—Quartervayne, it appeared, had re-

lations both in London and Portsmouth who could identify him: as for my evidence regarding him and Holliment, it could be given at the adjourned inquest on Holliment.

"Queer business this, altogether, Mr. Cranage," he suggested presently. "As queer a business as ever I've been mixed up with. Of course, to a certain point it's plain enough. That Chinaman, Chuh Sin, stole something from Mr. Cheng in Paris—I've seen Jifferdene a time or two, and he's told me all about Mr. Cheng—and this Holliment, with Quartervayne as accessory, stole it from Chuh Sin, and vamoosed, as they say, to London with it. That's clear! But—after that, Mr. Cranage? after that?"

I saw that he had some notion of his own, and asked him what it was.

"Well!" he said. "Those chaps at headquarters—Jifferdene, and the rest of 'em—they've got it all cut and dried, as they always have, that this Chuh Sin has got English accomplices, a gang, and that it's they who have done in Holliment, and Quartervayne, and Neamore, trying to recover the stolen article—which, Mr. Cranage, must be of immense value, judging by the fuss that's been made about it!—Lord save us! you might think it was the Koh-i-noor, or the Cullinan Diamond! Yes—that's the official view. But—I'm not so sure."

"What's your idea, Spiller?" I enquired. "You've got one."

He shook his head—but not in dissent.

"I've no great opinion of these Chinks!" he replied. "Rich or poor, high or low, I reckon they're a crafty lot. There was a chap in our force, once, who used to recite poetry—he come to no good in the end, by the bye—and he was very fond of a piece about a heathen Chinese. I agreed with it!—from what I've seen of 'em. Their ways, Mr. Cranage, are dark—as the feller that wrote that piece of poetry had the gumption to observe. But it strikes me that if there's anybody that's at the bottom of all this it's that Mr. Cheng!"

"I'm not sure that I don't agree with you, Spiller," I said.

"Mr. Cheng," he repeated, nodding his head. "That's the old Sphinx whose headpiece they want to get inside of! But I understand that a Chinaman is of all men in the world the very hardest to extract information from. Being a young gentleman of education, Mr. Cranage, you'll know more about it than I do."

"Pretty stiff nuts to crack, I believe," I answered.

"Well!" he remarked. "There's nuts and nuts. But I ain't never yet heard of a nut that you can't crack! All you want, Mr. Cranage, if the ordinary nut-cracker ain't strong enough, is a good hammer—or a flat-iron."

"And then, Spiller, you'd probably crack the kernel to smithereens!" I said. "We want to get this kernel out—whole!"

He observed that time would show, and with this

wise remark went away, adding, over his shoulder, when he had gone a few yards, that it might be next year, or next month, or next day, but something was sure to come out—dead certain!

Three days passed then, and nothing had come out. But early in the evening of the fourth—the fifth since the sudden disappearance of Lady Renardsmere—and just as I was sitting down to my solitary dinner, in walked Miss Peggie Manson, not in her riding-coat and breeches, but in a very swagger tailor-made costume. I was so astonished that I could only gaze at her—whereupon she flung a telegram on the table before me.

“The latest!” she remarked laconically.

I spread the flimsy sheet of paper before me and read, noting that the message had been handed in at Victoria at 5.30 that afternoon——

“I want you and Cranage to meet me at George Hotel Winchester at 9.30 this evening Walker is to take you both over in Rolls-Royce If however I don’t turn up there by 10 o’clock return home and wait wire early to-morrow

“HELENA RENARDSMERE”

“I suppose we’ve got to go?” I said, glancing at Peggie, who made a grimace and shrugged her shoulders by way of wordless reply. “All right—I’ll give orders to Walker. But what’s it all about
——”

"Pooh!" exclaimed Peggie. "What's the good of that? One of her sudden ideas."

We went off a little before eight o'clock. Winchester was only twenty-five miles away, and we arrived in its High Street well ahead of our time. We waited at the George until a quarter past ten. No Lady Renardsmere arrived. And so, having fulfilled her instructions, we set off home again. Neither of us had any suspicion that the telegram was a bogus one: we merely thought that its sender either had been prevented from getting down, or had changed her mind.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and Peggie and I, lost in the shadows of the big car, enjoyed our ride homeward. We forgot all else and became very friendly—the time passed so quickly that I was suddenly amazed to see the Admiral's Folly, a ruinous tower-like structure that stood on a wooded hill overlooking a strangely lonely bit of country about seven miles from Renardsmere. It was a landmark—everybody knew it for miles around.

"Good heavens!" said I. "We're nearly home! There's the Admiral's Folly up above us. I wish _____"

I was going to say that I wished we'd another hundred miles to go, when the car stopped with a sudden pressure of its powerful brakes that jerked us both forward. I pulled myself together and thrust my head out of the window.

And I felt myself turn sick at what I saw. There were three men in the narrow lane, with black masks across their faces, and in the hand of each man was a levelled revolver.

CHAPTER XVII

HANDS UP!

IN that tense moment I felt Peggie's hand grip my arm and her breath grow warm on my cheek as she let out a quick whispered exclamation.

"Jim!" she said. "Held up!"

"Yes!" I answered quickly. "Trapped! Wait!"

The three men came closer, their revolvers still raised. Two covered Walker; one came up to the side from which we were gazing at them. His right hand kept his revolver unpleasantly levelled in a straight line with the bridge of my nose: his left threw open the door of the car.

"Come out, you!" he said, in a firm determined voice which I knew to be that of a man of education. "Put your hands up as you step out! Now," he continued, as I promptly obeyed his orders, "are you armed?"

I made a big effort to keep cool, and I succeeded so far as to affect a laugh—a poor one, no doubt.

"Armed?" I answered. "No! Why should I be armed?"

But he kept me covered, and a second later I found Walker—who, I fear, though a very clever chauff-

feur, and full of nerve in that respect, was a chicken-hearted person when confronted with firearms—shivering at my side, his hands raised high above his cap. And while two of the men watched our every movement, or, rather, watched for any indication of a movement, the third went over us so thoroughly that I should say he could have made an inventory of all that we carried in our pockets. And at a muttered word from him, the other two dropped their weapons, and the man who had searched us turned to the car, motioning me to re-enter. At the same time the others signed to Walker to re-start the car and get back to his driving-seat. I heard a sharp military-like order to him.

“Turn up that lane on your left, towards the ruined tower! Go slowly—stop the instant you are told to stop! Make the slightest attempt to disobey, and you’ll be shot dead! Now put out those lights and get on!”

The car moved off, slowly, and turned into the lane indicated. One man stood on the step at our door; the other two were in front with Walker. It was a rough, grass-surfaced lane; the car, splendidly-sprunged as it was, bumped and jolted. We went up and up towards the Admiral’s Folly; its half-ruined towers loomed higher and higher before us: clearly these kidnappers were taking us there or somewhere near there. And in the gloom of the car Peggie and I sought for and held each other’s hands tightly.

"Jim!" she whispered. "Are they going to shoot us?"

"Not they—nor hurt us!" I answered, with a confidence which was far more assumed than real. "I've already reckoned up what they want. News!—information. We'd better realise it first as last, Peggie—we're in the hands of that infernal gang!"

"The—the murderers?" she asked.

"Aye!" I answered. "That lot—without doubt!"

"They—they spoke like gentlemen," she faltered.

"Makes it all the worse," I said. "When your gentleman turns devil, he's a perfect devil! But—the car's stopping."

We had come to a deep part of the narrow lane, there thickly overhung with trees, where there was a sort of side track leading to deep woods. Into this the car turned, stopped. The man at our door opened it.

"You and the lady come out!" he commanded in the same peremptory but cultured voice. "And don't let the lady be afraid—no harm will come to her. Nor to you and your man, either, if you're amenable."

"Amenable to what, may I ask?" I enquired, as we stepped out.

He gave me no answer. Instead he pointed to a certain spot where, from his gesture, we gathered that he wished us to stand, and, obedient to superior force, we stood there. Then he—who seemed to be the leader of the party—turned to Walker, who,

under orders from the other two, had dismounted. In a few short sharp sentences he gave him an order which the chauffeur (who was by this time, as I could well guess, in a fine state of alarm and nervousness) hastened to obey, and had the effect of making the car useless for the time being at any rate—I gathered from it that we were in for some sort of detention, and that our captors were taking no risks. And I reflected, while Walker, who began to weep, and sobbed audibly over his enforced task, obeyed orders, on the strangeness of our situation and on our helplessness. The Admiral’s Folly stood on the brow of a lonely hill, miles from anywhere; it was, itself, only approachable by one or two rough lanes such as that which we had traversed at our kidnappers’ commands, and it was extremely unlikely that anyone would come near it, for the immediate surroundings were wild, scrubby moorland tenanted only by a few scraggy sheep. The only link between ourselves and civilisation was the road on which we had been captured—on that certainly there was traffic; a good deal by day, a little by night. But . . . we were now three quarters of a mile from it.

Walker finished his unpleasant task—it must have wrung his heart to put his beloved mechanism out of gear at the command of these villains—and the leader motioned him to join Peggie and myself.

“Now!” he commanded, in the best drill-sergeant manner. “Go forward, you there, up the lane to

the ruins, above there. Don't attempt to escape, any of you, to right or left. March!"

We moved forward—Peggie in the middle, I on her right, Walker on her left. Our captors followed close on our heels. We kept silence (except that Walker still blubbered occasionally); so did they. And after a march of a hundred yards or so, we came to the Admiral's Folly. I had been there once or twice—just to examine so curious a spot—and I knew the ins and outs of it. It was a strange example of a rich man's whim. A high circular tower was surrounded at its base by four lesser towers, from each of which there was an entrance into the main one. These lesser towers were, mainly, completely ruinous, but the big structure was fairly intact, and in its lower storey was a room which the old sea-dog, its founder, had used as a banqueting-hall; there, according to local tradition, many a gay carousal had taken place. There was an odd feature in this place, still remaining—a stone table, and stone seats about it. And guessing that our kidnappers knew of it as well as I did, I marched my party straight in there, and taking off my overcoat made it into a cushion for Peggie to sit on.

Our captors said nothing when Walker, at a signal from me, sat down, nor when I seated myself. They sat down themselves, facing me. It was, as I have said, a moonlight night—a particularly brilliant night—and the old tower being roofless,

and there being several ruinous windows and apertures in its walls, we could all see each other with a fair amount of clearness. And my first concern was—as far as I could—to make a close examination of our kidnappers. It was impossible, of course, to see anything of their faces, for each was closely masked with black in such a fashion as to leave nothing but a point of chin showing. But I could estimate their figures, and I studied them closely. One was a shortish, stocky man; I thought that he might be a Chinaman in European clothes. Another was somewhat taller, and lankier—a nondescript figure. But the third, the leader, was a big, hefty fellow with a strong frame and broad shoulders—a formidable chap. All three were dressed in dark lounge suits, and all three wore caps, well pulled down over the top edges of their masks.

During all the proceedings that followed, the only one of these three men who spoke to us was the leader, though the other two occasionally whispered to him. But from the start he was spokesman—and he lost no time in getting to work. And as I had guessed, the man he wanted was . . . me.

“Your name is James Cranage,” he began.

“That is my name,” I answered promptly.

“You’re the man who was in temporary employment at Holliment’s, in Portsmouth, for a day?” he went on.

“I don’t mind admitting that,” said I.

"You saw the attack on Holliment's by a party of men late at night?"

"Yes—headed by a Chinaman."

"Never mind the Chinaman!—you give me plain answers. After that you became secretary to Lady Renardsmere, and you're still in her employ?"

"That, too, is correct."

"Do you remember a man named Neamore coming to see Lady Renardsmere, and her going with him, there and then, to London, and her returning, alone, that same night?"

I began to think rather more deeply. Up to now I was giving nothing away: these things were common news, already bandied about. And I saw no harm in replying to the last question.

"Yes, I remember that," I said.

He bent forward, and his manner became more insistent; it was evident he was coming to a critical stage.

"Now then! Did you, the next day, undertake any journey on Lady Renardsmere's behalf, carrying any small article or parcel for her? Answer!"

"No, I shall not!" I said. "No answer from me!"

There was a dead silence. Then the leader spoke in almost a whisper.

"We shall shoot you dead in that girl's presence if you don't!" he murmured. "And at once!"

"In that case, you'll certainly get nothing out of me!" I retorted. "If you can't get anything out of me alive, you certainly can't out of me dead!"

"Answer!" he said. "We'll give you one minute. At the end of that——"

It was then that Walker's nerves went to wrack and ruin. He had been whimpering all the time, but now he burst into a howl.

"Oh, Mr. Cranage, sir, tell 'em!" he cried suddenly wringing his hands. "Tell 'em, Mr. Cranage, for God's sake, before we all get shot! It can't matter, Mr. Cranage!—tell 'em and be done with it! Mr. Cranage . . ."

The leader laughed. And he turned from me to the chauffeur.

"Ah, so you know, my friend!" he said. "Come, then, out with it! Did——"

"Hold your tongue, Walker!" I broke in. "Be a man! They daren't——"

Before the last syllable was well out of my mouth, all three men had drawn their revolvers, and the leader had got his in unpleasant proximity to my nose.

"Hold *your* tongue," he said, in a quiet voice which was much more awe-compelling than any vociferation. "Get up! You and that girl go over to the alcove across there, and stand till we call for you. Quick, now!—no nonsense if you value your life."

I knew then that it was absolutely useless to trifle with, to attempt to bluff, or to defy these fellows: they meant business. I touched Peggie's arm; we rose and went over to the place pointed out, a sort of recess in the hall. The three men at the table,

each toying suggestively with his revolver, gathered around the miserable chauffeur.

"What can he tell?" whispered Peggie, as we stood side by side in the shadows.

"Plenty!" said I. "He drove me!"

"But—tell of anything important?"

"Yes! He knows!"

"What?—everything?"

"No—but sufficient. And—when these fellows have done with him, it'll be useless for me to hold my tongue any longer. They've got us!"

We stood silent for a time, watching. By this, Walker, with three revolvers in front of him, was talking as fast as terror could make him; we, of course, could not hear a word of what he said, but I knew what tale he was telling, and what its effect would be. And in a very few minutes, the three men slipped their revolvers back into their pockets and the leader turned and beckoned to us.

"Come back here, you!" he commanded, in that come-to-heel fashion that made me itch to hit him fair and square. "Sit there again! Now, then," he went on, as we obeyed his orders, "we've got a stage further. This man has told us of his driving Lady Renardsmere and Neamore up to London and of all her doings that day: that is, as regards her **movements**. Next day, at Lady Renardsmere's orders, he drove you to London in the afternoon, to Lincoln's Inn Fields, to the office of Pennithwaite, Lady Renardsmere's solicitor. Now then,

it's useless for you to keep silence, and foolish to make a martyr of yourself, so you answer my questions. Why did Lady Renardsmere send you to Pennithwaite? Smart, now!"

It was useless to hold out any longer: there was murder in that resolute voice. And I replied, quickly——

"To carry a letter and a small parcel!"

"To Pennithwaite himself?"

"To Pennithwaite himself."

"So you know what was in the small parcel?"

"I do not! I have no idea whatever!"

"Nor in the letter?"

"Of course not—it was written by Lady Renardsmere herself, in her private room, and sealed."

"Was she anxious about its direct delivery into Pennithwaite's hands?"

"Very!"

"And you delivered both parcel and letter into his hands?"

"I did."

"What did he do with the parcel?"

"I don't know—except that after reading the letter he took the parcel into an inner room. Then he returned and gave me a receipt for letter and parcel."

"That's absolutely all you know of that?"

"Absolutely everything!"

"Lady Renardsmere never told you, at any time, anything about the contents of that parcel?"

"Never!"

He seemed to reflect for a moment: suddenly he asked another question.

"We've referred to this as a parcel: what size was it?"

"It depends on what you call a parcel—it was really a small packet, a very small packet which easily went into a waistcoat pocket. Sealed."

"And after Pennithwaite got it, you know nothing about it?"

"Nothing whatever!"

He nodded, remained silent a moment, then nudged his companions, and all three rising they retired a little way and began to converse in whispers. After a time they came back, and without sitting down the leader started another series of questions.

"Do you know where Lady Renardsmere now is?" he asked.

"No more than you do!" I retorted. "Perhaps less!"

"Be civil! Have you any idea where she is?"

"Yes, I've an idea, but I can't say that it's any sound foundation. On the Continent."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because the last communication I had from her was from Dover."

He suddenly turned on Peggie.

"You're Miss Manson, Lady Renardsmere's trainer," he said, in the assured tones of a man who

knows what he is talking about. "Where do you think she is?"

"On the Continent," answered Peggie, promptly.

"Why?"

"For the same reason that Mr. Cranage just gave you. The last communication I had from Lady Renardsmere was from Dover."

Again he turned to me.

"Have you any idea why Lady Renardsmere should go—suddenly—on the Continent—just now?" he demanded.

For the life of me I couldn't help giving him the answer that I did. I had been longing to hit him between the eyes all the time: perhaps I could hit him in another fashion. And out it came.

"Yes!" I said. "It's my opinion that she's gone to meet a Chinaman, Mr. Cheng!"

That did hit him! It hit all three. I saw them start—plainly. They walked aside again, and talked. Presently the leader called to us.

"Come along! We're done with you. Follow us down the lane to your car."

I heard Walker, who had never ceased to whimper like a puppy, mutter a sound expressive of devout thanksgiving. We all rose and followed our captors out of the ruins and down the lane. They walked in front, abreast, swinging their arms loosely, in close whispered consultation. The moon was brighter than ever, but the thick bushes on either side the lane were craters of blackness.

And suddenly, before we realized it, and with such swiftness that it was over before the men in front knew what was happening, five strapping men, revolvers in hand, sprang out of those bushes with a stern shout from one of "Hands up!" Four, I saw at a glance, by their dark blue uniform, were police, but the fifth was a civilian. He was nearest me as he and the police closed round the unready desperadoes, and as the silver moonlight fell on his outstretched arm, I saw, with a mighty amazement and overwhelming sense of relief, a great tattooed mark on the steel-taut wrist. The American!—Peyton!

CHAPTER XVIII

HANDS OUT!

I COULD have yelled—danced, too—for sheer joy as the scoundrels in front of us, completely taken unawares, threw their arms skyward, with a readiness which made me certain that they were well acquainted with the strict rules of their own game. The three pairs of hands went up with military precision—and remained up! No wonder!—with five stalwart men at front and sides and five ugly-looking revolvers in close proximity to eyes and ears. And of the three, only the leader put his outraged feelings into words. They were short and venomous.

“Damnation! Trapped!”

There was a crystallization of everything that a baffled devil could spit out of his black throat in those two words—hatred, despair, hopelessness, impotent raging. And the next sound that broke the stillness of the quiet night came as a veritable refreshment. That was the voice of the biggest of the five big men, in whom I suddenly recognised a certain stalwart police-sergeant, an ex-army man, stationed at a place near Renardsmere.

“Go through them, Burton! Move a finger or a toe, any one of you three, and . . .”

One of the constables cased his revolver and went through the three captives in a fashion that was as thorough as it was speedy. Within a minute—literally a minute—he had whipped the weapons which had robbed Walker of half his wits out of the men’s side pockets and had thrust them into my hands; within another came the rattle of a second order from the police-sergeant.

“Hands out! Quick, now!”

We stood, fascinated, staring, as the prisoners mechanically dropped their arms and shoved out their hands. There were gleams of something bright in the moonlight; there were quick, sharp metallic clickings of steel . . . the police relaxed their tense attitudes and drew back a little. But they still handled their revolvers.

“Off with those masks, Burton!” ordered the police-sergeant. “Let’s see their faces!”

I drew still nearer, in spite of a protesting whimper from the still trembling Walker. I, too, wanted to see those faces. As I have already said, there was one man whom I thought might be a Chinaman. But as Burton deftly tore away the strips of cloth, I saw that there was no Chinaman there; all three were white men. And the leader was a handsome fellow, with good, well-bred features, and a look of braininess and power, but with the most sinister eyes I had ever seen. The sergeant

went close and looked at him, and the man looked back and suddenly opened his lips.

"Damn you!" he said in a low, mocking voice. "You never saw me in your life before!"

"I'll see a good deal of you in my life to come, my lad!—for a while!" retorted the sergeant. He turned towards me. "Miss Manson and you all safe, Mr. Cranage?"

"We're quite safe, sergeant, thank you," said I. "But it's a wonder! Those fellows——"

"Never mind them, now, Mr. Cranage," he interrupted. "We've got 'em—thanks to Mr. Peyton here. Now then, that's your car that's down there, isn't it?—we found it, as we came up. We've got another, bottom of the lane. These chaps have one somewhere about, but we'll not trouble to ask them where it's hidden, just now; the thing at present is to get 'em under lock and key. We'll take 'em off right away, and do you follow in your car to Mal-lant—you'll hear how we came to be here when you get down there to the police-station. Now then, you three, march!—and remember here are five armed men round you, and that if you make the slightest attempt to escape you'll be shot down. Get a move on!—straight to the bottom of this lane! Smart, now!"

In another second this grim procession was moving; in another minute it was vanishing into the shadows, and we three, left there, stood staring after it. I believe Walker began to say his prayers, or to utter his thanksgivings; he was certainly muttering

something that sounded like devout words. But I roused him out of that.

"Walker!" I said. "Can you start that car? Or is it——"

He jumped like a cat as I laid my hand on his shoulder: I veritably believe he had forgotten the car.

"The car, Mr. Cranage, the car, sir? Oh, yes, sir, I can start the car," he quavered. "They only made me—oh, yes, sir, I can start her. But, oh Lord! Mr. Cranage, do you think they've really gone?—is there no fear, Mr. Cranage——"

"Get that car to rights!" I said. "Come on now!—pull yourself together—we don't want to keep Miss Manson standing here all the rest of the night. Get at it!"

He suddenly recovered his senses and shot off to the car, and I turned to Peggie. We stood silently looking at each other for a good minute.

"Is this real, Jim?" she said at last.

I drew a very long, big breath.

"Real enough!" I answered. "Phew!"

"Yes," she said. "That's it! That's just how I feel. Phew! But——"

Then we stood silent again.

"I wonder!" I muttered. "I wonder——"

"I know what you're thinking," she broke in. "How did that American man, Peyton, track them?"

"We shall hear," I answered. "He'd no time to tell me, then. But didn't you see him give me a nod

and a wink as they went off? And did you see how he watched those fellows—and that nasty-looking revolver of his—and the big tattoo mark on his wrist? And—I suspected *him* for a bit, after he'd been to Renardsmere! Mystery! But let's get down to Mallant and hear all about it. Peggie!"

"What?" she asked, as we moved away down the lane.

"Do you feel queer?" I asked, with a laugh that came a bit shakily.

"Not now," she answered. "But—to-morrow ____"

"Never mind!" I said. "To-morrow——"

"Car ready, sir," shouted Walker, in something—only something—like his usual voice. "Difficult spot to turn in, though, sir. If you and Miss Manson'll walk down to the road——"

We walked down to the road. But just as we turned a sharp corner of the lane, a few yards from its mouth, Peggie suddenly clutched my arm with one hand and pointed forward with the other. There, in the middle of the road, stood a man, half-obscured in the shadow of a great elm which towered between him and the moon. We both paused; he turned, saw us, and called out cheerily——

"Come right ahead, Mr. Cranage—it's only I—Peyton!"

We went right ahead: we shook hands with him, solemnly; although I was already head over heels in love with her, I wouldn't have cared a damn if

Peggie had thrown her arms around his neck and kissed him. And then, after the manner of Anglo-Saxon folk, before either of us said a word, he and I pulled out our pipes, filled and lighted them with apparent unconcern, and fell to smoking.

"You might introduce us, Jim!" said Peggie, suddenly.

I introduced them, with more ceremony than was necessary, and with an apology for my lack of good manners.

"At such a time as—as that," I added, "manners are apt to go by the board."

Peyton nodded towards the gaunt ruins high above us.

"Pretty hot time up there, I guess?" he questioned.

"Hotter than we cared for—for a while," I answered. "It's a wonder our chauffeur isn't a raving lunatic! But—you seem, from what the sergeant said, to have been our saviour! How did it come about?"

"I stopped behind, now, to tell you," he said. "It struck me that as those three fellows were pretty tightly handcuffed—one of your policemen told me that these new handcuffs are no joke, once on!—and that they'd got a guard of four pretty determined and well-armed men, there was no need for me to dance attendance any longer, though I'll certainly go down with you to this Mallant the sergeant spoke of. How did it come about?" he went on.

"Well, it came about because your humble servant is a bit of an ornithologist, and had never in his life had the luck to hear a nightingale! That's how it came about—just!"

"Do tell us all about it!" exclaimed Peggie. "What had a nightingale to do with it?"

"Just this!" he replied with a laugh. "After Mr. Cranage there had shown me over Renardsmere the other day I went wandering about country, a bit aimlessly. And in an inn that I struck early this evening, somewhere away down there, I got talking to a man who was, like myself, a bird-lover. He told me that away up here in this valley, just below that old ruin there, there were nightingales to hear, in plenty. So as it came dusk, I wheeled up here, had a look round, put my machine in a safe place, and hid myself in a grove of trees, meaning not only to hear but to see a nightingale and observe his little ways. Well, without going into over much detail, those three men came along, in a car. They stopped at my grove. They hid that car—I know where it is. And, all unsuspecting that I was within a few feet—literally—of them, they sat down on a bank just behind the hedge where I was hidden, and they talked. A good lot of what they said was incomprehensible to me, but I made this out—that they were very anxious to get hold of Lady Renardsmere, and that as she'd vanished, they'd laid a fine lot to entrap her secretary that very night, and were going to waylay him just above as

he returned from a fool's errand to Winchester on which they'd sent him."

"Ah!" said I. "So that was their work!"

"Seems so," answered Peyton. "Well, I heard enough to know that you and Miss Manson were in danger—they wanted to question her, too, about Lady Renardsmere. Fortunately, instead of sitting in one place all the time, they got up and began to stroll around a bit: fortunately, too, I'd left my wheel on the other side of the grove. So I stole quietly across—I'm an old hand at woodcraft—and I got that wheel down the side of a hedge, and into a road, and I made tracks for the nearest village. I'd the luck to hit on a policeman there that was a right smart man. We got on the telephone to the police-station at Mallant, a few miles away, and within half-an-hour that sergeant was along in a fast car, with the other men, and all well armed. And . . . we just came up here. Say!—who do you suppose those fellows are? Because I've been reading the papers more than usual since I came down this way, and I've got an idea."

"Well—and what is your idea?" I asked.

"My idea is that those three are mixed up with these London murders," he answered. "There were cryptic references in their talk—I heard a name mentioned."

"What name?"

"Holliment! That was the first man who was murdered."

"I don't think there's the least doubt that these three fellows are members of the gang," I said. "I've felt sure of it from the moment they stopped us."

"Just so!" he agreed. "I'm certain of it, too! But, as I tell you, I've lately read your newspapers closely, and followed up these cases, and, granting that these three are members of the gang, there's now a big question strikes me. Does it strike you?"

"I should want to know what it is before I could answer that," I said. "What is the question?"

He looked from ~~one~~ to the other of us, and in the moonlight his keen face took on a keener expression.

"Where's the Chinaman?" he said. "The Chinaman who broke into Holliment's store at Portsmouth, and completely disappeared immediately after? For . . . the Chinaman's at the bottom of all this! The Chinaman's behind those fellows! They're . . . instruments!"

Walker had come up with the car. He was plainly impatient to be off, and I knew why. That neighbourhood had its terrors for him; never again would Walker come round about the Admiral's Folly if he could help it! He was nervous still, and suspicious of Peyton, and he made so bold as to nudge my elbow. Peyton saw the action and turned on him.

"Make yourself easy, my friend!" he said with a laugh. "There are no more bandits about, and if there were I've got a little instrument in my hip-pocket that would quieten them. Look here!—just

you take your car nice and softly down to the bottom of that dip. You'll see a grove of trees there—my wheel's just inside the gate. Put her aboard your car—and we'll join you in a minute. Now," he went on, as the chauffeur promptly obeyed orders, "that's what I say, Miss Manson and Mr. Cranage—where's the Chinaman? Those three fellows are his instruments—partners—factotums—but he's the boss! Your police have got them—but he's at large. And as long as he's at large—eh?"

"Just so!" I agreed as we slowly followed Walker down the hill. "The Chinaman is without doubt at the bottom of it. But—you seem to know more about it, in some ways, than I do. I—for example—I didn't know that so much had come out to the public about the Chinaman?"

He paused, looking at me in astonishment.

"What?" he exclaimed. "You haven't seen the London evening papers, then? No?—well, I bought some at seven o'clock at Mallant railway depot as I passed it. Your police headquarters in London—Scotland Yard—have resorted to publicity. There's the whole story there—you're in it—from start to finish. The Chinaman is a fellow named Chuh Sin, who was secretary to a swell compatriot, one Cheng, and he's supposed to have stolen some extraordinarily valuable object—jewel, maybe—from Cheng in Paris, and escaped to this country with it, and had it stolen from him, and now he and a gang that he's got together are after the stolen thing and

stopping at nothing to get it back. Chuh Sin!—a Chinaman who's lost the lobe of his left ear!"

"Ah!" I said, remembering Mr. Cheng's tardily-given information to Jifferdene and myself at the Langham Hotel. "So that's in the papers, is it?"

"That, and a lot more," he replied. "I've two papers in my pocket. Evidently, your police see that the widest publicity is the only thing, and they're enlisting the press in their service. Oh, there's no end!—I tell you, the tale's told from your doings with Holliment in Portsmouth right up to the last murder. Well, I guess here's another chapter to-night!—those three fellows are the Chinaman's accomplices, or some of 'em. But . . . where is he? For, so long as he's alive . . ."

He made an expressive gesture, and we looked enquiringly at him.

"What?" asked Peggie.

"There'll be more murder!" he answered. "For craft and subtlety . . . but let's get down to this Mallant place and hear if the police have got anything out of those three men."

Walker, fearful of every shadow in the moonlit road, ran us down to Mallant in half-an-hour. The little town was fast asleep; there was not a footfall in its deserted streets, and the lights had long gone out in the windows of its quaint old houses. But there were lights in plenty at the police-station, and uniformed men enough in the corridors and pas-

sages. One, immediately on our arrival, ushered us straight into a private office, where we found the sergeant and two other men, evidently superior officials. On the table in front of them lay a miscellaneous collection of articles—I guessed what they were before the sergeant spoke.

"These are what we found on them, Mr. Cranage," he said. "No end of ready money, as you see. Good watches—personal appointments—all that sort of thing. But the main thing's this," he went on as he picked up a tiny pocket-book. "This was on the leader. There are entries in here about Holli-ment, Quartermayne, Neamore—addresses in London. There are some memoranda about all three which we haven't made out yet, and some entries which refer to you and Lady Renardsmere. And there's no doubt these three have been concerned in those London murders!"

"I think you may be certain of that," said I. "I've been sure of it for the last two hours. But—who are they?"

"You may be sure they'll not tell us that, Mr. Cranage," he answered, with a grim smile. "That'll have to be found out. Of course they refused to give names and addresses. But, unknown to him, the leader's already been identified."

"Identified?" I exclaimed. "Already!"

"Already, sir," he replied. "One of our constables, who was formerly stationed in Portsmouth, knows him; knew him at once, when he was brought

in. He's a man who was for some time assistant to a doctor in Portsmouth——"

"Then—a medical man himself!" I said in amazement.

"Precisely, Mr. Cranage—a young doctor. He got into some trouble at his post, and was more or less kicked out. According to our man, he was lounging about Portsmouth for some time after that: was seen, you understand, with some shady characters. And putting two and two together I should say he fell in with this Chinaman whose story's told in the London papers to-night. The other two are no doubt accomplices—we don't know who they are . . . yet. And . . . where's the Chinaman?"

"That's what we've been asking ourselves," I answered.

"Well—we've got these three, anyway," he said, with a glance at his two companions. "They're safe! Now, Mr. Cranage, you take Miss Manson home—and all three of you come back here at half-past ten in the morning. These men will be brought up and remanded . . . and after that . . . well, there'll be some more for the newspapers, and a fine tale, too!"

We went away. We took Peggie home to Manson Lodge; then I took Peyton home with me to Renardsmere House. Next morning we all went back to the police-court at Mallant; there were the three men in the dock: silent, watchful—but the leader, despite his good looks, seemed more evil and

sinister than ever. A little evidence from two or three of us, and they were remanded and carried off under a strong guard. We all went home again—Peyton with me. And that day nothing happened, and the next day nothing happened. But on the third morning when I opened the newspaper the first thing I saw was a mass of big black type, which slowly resolved itself into this:—

ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS MURDER!

WELL-KNOWN LONDON SOLICITOR FOUND
STABBED TO DEATH IN HIS OWN OFFICE!

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOURTH MURDER

IT needed no more than one glance at the letterpress which followed after these glaring headlines to show me what had happened. I knew, before I read one word more, that I should see a name there . . . and there the name was——

PENNITHWAITE!

I don't mind confessing that this knocked me over in far worse fashion than anything that had transpired up to that moment. It was the suggestion of secrecy that did it—murder, secret and intangible, stalking like an impalpable thing rather than in a material form. Before I read a line further, I had a vision of that big, solemn room in the old house in Lincoln's Inn Fields . . . the prim, elderly man of law . . . the whole atmosphere of papers and parchment . . . the orderliness of the place, as if some fussy, precise old maid tidied it every day . . . the quiet, regular beating of the clock on the mantelpiece, with a picture of some Lord Chief Justice over it, in his full robes and wig . . . and . . . and it faded into another . . . of the same prim, elderly man, so meticulously fastidious in his personal appearance, so evidently strict about

the arrangements around him, lying across his desk, in a pool of his own blood . . . knifed!

PENNITHWAITE! The fourth murder—the fourth victim! And—the next? For, although three of his undoubted associates or instruments were safely locked and bolted in at Portsmouth Gaol, the Chinaman was still at large. Before I read anything, I knew that this was his work. While the other three had tried bullying and coercion on me to get at the secret of my mission from Lady Renardsmere to Mr. Pennithwaite, he, left in London, had ferreted Pennithwaite out for himself . . . and here was more copy for the newspapers!

It was only by a big effort that I could control my nerves sufficiently to hold the newspaper steadily before me. And I had to give that up; it shook and rattled so much in my hands that the lines of type ran together: I had to lay it down on the table close by, and bend over it.

There was not a great deal to read, and it seemed to me that not one word came which I could not have anticipated. Just this:—

“Another mysterious and terrible murder, apparently the fourth of a series, planned and executed with almost diabolical cunning, was discovered yesterday morning, when Mr. Pennithwaite, a well-known solicitor, having an extensive connection amongst landed families, was found stabbed to death in his private room at his

office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The facts of the case, as so far given by the police authorities, are, on the surface, very simple. It appears that Mr. Pennithwaite, an elderly man, and a bachelor, whose private residence is at Seven Oaks, had a bedroom at his offices which he used when occasionally staying the night in town. On Tuesday evening he told the caretaker of the offices that he should stay in town that night and ordered his bedroom to be made ready. He was seen by his head-clerk at six o'clock, and then gave some instructions about leaving out certain papers on his desk for his consideration later in the evening. According to the caretaker, Mr. Pennithwaite, after his clerks had left, went out to dine at his club; it has been ascertained by the police that he did dine there, and remained there until ten o'clock. Some of his fellow members who have been seen on the subject say that he was in his usual good health and spirits. The caretaker at Lincoln's Inn Fields saw him come in at about half-past ten; he bade the caretaker good-night and went into his private office; the caretaker heard him lock the door. The bedroom used by Mr. Pennithwaite on these occasions opens out of the private office, there is no other way into it. Yesterday morning, when the clerks assembled at the usual time, from nine to ten o'clock, Mr. Pennithwaite had not come out of his private rooms, nor unlocked the door admitting to them. At half-past ten the head-clerk, having heard from the caretaker that Mr. Pennithwaite was certainly on the premises, and having failed to get any re-

sponse to repeated knockings, went round to the rear of the building, and observed that the window of the bedroom was slightly open. He obtained a short ladder and getting into the room went forward to the private office. There he found Mr. Pennithwaite lying across his desk, dead, in a pool of blood. He had evidently been stabbed to death as he sat reading documents at his desk; the papers before him were saturated with blood; a half-smoked cigar had fallen from his hand upon the carpet; on the desk stood a tumbler half-full of whiskey-and-water: everything showed that he had been caught and struck down unawares. The object of the murderer was made plain from a mere glance round the room, an apartment of considerable size. Every drawer in the desk had been pulled out and rifled; the contents were thrown all over the floor. The murdered man's pockets had been turned out, too, where he sat; in one of the two safes in the room his keys were found dangling from the lock; the contents of the safes were lying in confusion in front of them. There were numerous chests and bureaus in the private room; every one had been gone through systematically. Whether the murderer succeeded in finding whatever it was that he sought for is, of course, not known, but there seems little doubt that he had managed to enter the private room while Mr. Pennithwaite was at his club, that he murdered his victim immediately after the latter's return, and that he spent most of the night—the middle portion at any rate—in his mad search. Nor is there much doubt that this

murder is co-related to the murders of the three men, Holliment, Quaterwayne and Neamore, and has been the work of at any rate one member of a gang operating in a subtly secret manner. The only satisfactory feature of the situation at present is that the police believe that three members of this gang are already under arrest on another charge, and that they feel confident that complicity in these murders will easily be proved against them. As regards the murder of Mr. Pennithwaite, however, there is not up to the time of writing the slightest clue as to the exact identity and whereabouts of the murderer. The most disquieting feature of the case is the ease with which he did his fiendish work and got clean away from the scene of his crime."

Peyton came into my room as I was finishing the last sentences of this account. Silently, I pointed to the headlines, and to the column which followed; silently, he leant over my shoulder and read the thing through for himself, while I re-read some of it. And at the end we stood up and looked at each other.

"The Chinaman!" he said in a low voice. "His work! Didn't I say so? As long as he's at large there'll be murder!"

"As if I didn't know that!" said I. "And—who next?"

He nodded his head and sitting down began to fill his pipe.

"This unfortunate old lawyer, now?" he asked. "Lady Renardsmere's solicitor, eh?"

"Just so!" I assented. "The man to whom I carried the packet."

"Which," he said, solemnly, "contained, without doubt, the thing, whatever it is, that this Chinaman is murdering people to get hold of! Those fellows, the other night, got it out of you that you carried it to Pennithwaite?"

"They did!—having first forced it out of Walker, with their revolvers, that he drove me there," I replied. "But, of course, I didn't know what was in the packet, so I couldn't tell them."

"I'm not on that line," he remarked. "I'm on this—those fellows were collared and locked up before they could act on the information they extracted from you. But—Pennithwaite's been visited and murdered. Now then—is the Chinaman working on lines of his own, or is it just that he, being left in London, found out about Pennithwaite and lost no time in acting? Which?"

"That takes some thinking out," I said, after a pause. "I think the Chinaman must have remained in London while the other three came down here. In a quiet countryside like this, a Chinaman would be spotted at once; in London——"

"Many of them in London?" he interrupted me to ask.

"Quite a lot! Down in the East End, a great many—Limehouse is China, to all intents and purposes," I answered. "But these are Chinamen of the—I suppose—inferior classes. In other, better

quarters of the town there are Chinamen of superior class—what we should call gentlemen. What licks me about this particular man, Chuh Sin—all the name I know him by—is this: he's lost part of an ear! Therefore he's easily identifiable. Where can he get? Where can he put himself?—how does he keep in the shadow?—that he hasn't been pounced upon before now? Good lord!—a Chinaman, with the lobe of his ear gone!—you'd have thought that the police would have combed him out of all the Chinese in London, days ago!"

"Yes," he said, nodding solemnly, "but your Chinaman is a past master in all sorts of things that Westerners can't understand. That fellow's fairly on the war-path for this mysterious article that he's after, and it's going to take a lot to stop him! My own opinion, of course, is that he didn't find it at Pennithwaite's. And so——"

He paused and looked at me through wisps of curling smoke . . . significantly.

"Well?" I said.

"The thing'll go on," he remarked, laconically. "Holliment! That's one. Quartermayne! That's two. Neamore! That's three. Pennithwaite! That's four. And five will be . . . eh?"

"For God's sake, man, whom?" I exclaimed. "This is . . ."

"Hell!" he assented. "Hell! But . . . got to be faced. The next'll be Lady Renardsmere."

I said nothing. Instead I sat staring at him. I

had a vision of my queer old employer—digging the garden. Lady Renardsmere . . .

“Lady Renardsmere!” he repeated. “Sure! She’s got the goods! Or, if she hasn’t got the goods in hand, she knows where they are. Look at this, now, and see if there’s a flaw in it! Holliment and Quartermayne without a doubt robbed Chuh Sin of the thing which he’d robbed Mr. Cheng; Holliment, Quartermayne and Neamore sold that thing to Lady Renardsmere for ten thousand pounds; Chuh Sin and his lot murdered Holliment, Quartermayne, Neamore and Pennithwaite in an effort to recover possession. But . . . sure as we’re breathing men, that Chinaman knows by now that if there’s one soul alive who knows where that thing—whatever it is—is, that soul’s Lady Renardsmere! And . . . he’ll go for her! Not, perhaps, this time, by murder.”

“Then he’ll have to get out of England,” said I. “Lady Renardsmere’s on the Continent.”

“How do you know that?” he suggested. “She mayn’t be. From all you’ve told me, Cranage, I reckon this old lady is playing a fine game of bluff! What I can’t make out is just this—what’s her game? What’s this thing she’s got hold of?—for the possession of which murder’s being done right and left? What is it? You tell me she’s a multi-millionaire!—well, is there anything she can’t buy that she lays a fancy to? What’s this thing?”

“My own belief is that it’s some immensely fine stone—a priceless diamond, or something of that

sort," I answered. "I told you she's a craze for acquiring that sort of thing, and stops at nothing to get hold of whatever it is she takes a liking for. I've heard queer tales about her in that way—since I came here. But in this instance—why all the secrecy? For I'll bet anything that when she bought this thing from Neamore she didn't know but what it was a perfectly legitimate transaction—I mean she didn't know that the thing was stolen property."

"When did she know that it was?" he asked.

"I think, when Miss ^{Mr.} Hepple and I had a talk with her, and when the two detectives came down and she gave them the slip," I replied. "That was when she cleared out."

"Um!" he said, reflectively. "I guess I know what she did, too, when she cleared out!"

"I wish I did!" I exclaimed. "What did she do?"

"Seems pretty plain, Cranage, I think," he answered. "She went straight to Pennithwaite's office in London, and took away that thing from him. And I should say that wherever she is, she's got it in her pocket. And that makes the situation _____"

Just then a knock came at my door and a footman entered.

"Mr. Jifferdene to see you, sir," he announced.

I turned in surprise; Jifferdene, alone, was already entering the room: it seemed to me that he looked unusually grave. I hastened to introduce Peyton.

"Whose name you've seen in the papers, Jifferdene, in connection with our affair of the other night," I said. "You know how those three men were collared——"

"I've just come along from seeing 'em, at Portsmouth Gaol," he interrupted, sitting down between us. "I went down there first thing this morning to have a careful look at all three."

"Did you know any of them?" I asked.

"Not one! Never set eyes on a mother's son of 'em before!" he replied. "Of course, as you know, one has been identified—renegade young medico who's been knocking about Portsmouth ever since he was turned out by a doctor who'd employed him, and upon whom the police had had an eye for some time. But the others—nobody's got a notion about their identity, yet. Time for that, though, Mr. Cranage. The thing is—there's no doubt they're members of that gang—the Chinaman's."

"The thing—the real thing, Jifferdene, is that the Chinaman's at large!" I said. "He murdered Mr. Pennithwaite! One Chinaman—with the lobe of an ear gone—against the entire resources of the London police!"

He nodded, as if in full comprehension of my meaning, but he looked neither offended nor crestfallen. And instead of making any answer or comment, he suddenly leaned forward and tapped my knee.

"Mr. Cranage!" he said. "Do you know where Lady Renardsmere is?"

"No!" I answered promptly. "I don't! Do you?"

He made no answer to that, either. His eyes suddenly turned to the newspaper lying spread out on the table.

"They fetched me to that!" he said in a low voice. "I was there—at Lincoln's Inn Fields—within half-an-hour of the head clerk's discovery. That Chinaman—if it was the Chinaman—must have been in there for hours—hours! It looked as if he'd examined every speck of dust in the place! And I'm wondering—did he find what he wanted?"

He looked from one to the other of us. And it was Peyton who answered the question which he put.

"I should say not!" he said. "No."

Jifferdene regarded him attentively and musingly.

"Aye?—and what makes you think that, sir?" he asked. "You'll have reasons?"

"Good ones!" said Peyton. "Because I don't believe the thing—whatever it is—was there to be found. Wasted time!"

"Where, then, do you think that thing—as you say, whatever it is—may be, then, sir?" enquired Jifferdene. "You're evidently well up in the matter."

"Read as much as I could of it in the papers, and Mr. Cranage there has told me more," responded Peyton. "I think the thing's in Lady Renardsmere's pocket!"

Jifferdene sighed, and nodded several times—at nothing.

“Not so sure that I don’t think that myself,” he said softly. “And of course, if this Chinaman gets on to that, then . . . Lady Renardsmere will be the next.”

“If you haven’t laid hands on him before he gets at her,” said I. “But do you mean to tell me, Jifferdene——”

He got up, holding out a hand as if to stave off further remark.

“I’ve had a rare lot of experience, gentlemen, in my time,” he said. “I’ve seen some queer things and strange things, and I’ve done some things myself that have been called both clever and smart. But I’ll tell you this—I’ve never come across the equal of this chap for diabolical cunning! But you didn’t see him! There’s no doubt that he’s been in London ever since that affair in Portsmouth in which you took part, Mr. Cranage; no doubt, either, that those three fellows I saw an hour ago are his tools or his accomplices, or both, but the man himself—Lord save us! he might be a disembodied spirit, and ——”

“I guess you’ll find him very material flesh and blood—yellow,” interrupted Peyton. “Disembodied spirits don’t carry knives!”

Jifferdene nodded again—at nothing. Then, remarking that he’d a car at the front and must be off, he said good-morning to Peyton, and motioned

me to follow him out. On the terrace, he turned confidentially——

“Mr. Cranage,” he whispered, “a word for you alone! You say you don’t know where Lady Renardsmere is? I don’t know where she may be to-day, but I know where she was three days ago. In Paris! She was seen at the Hotel Bristol there. And guess with whom?—seen in conversation with him.”

“Hang guessing!” I retorted. “Say, man!”

“Mr. Cheng!” he answered, with a meaning look. “Mr. Cheng—whom Chuh Sin robbed!”

CHAPTER XX

THE PARK LANE BUTLER

WE stood looking at each other, in silence, for a full minute: then, although there was no one nearer than a footman who stood at the hall door and a taxi-cabman who waited at the foot of the steps leading from the terrace, we obeyed a common impulse and walked away from the house.

"How do you come to know that, Jifferdene?" I asked.

"I'll tell you, Mr. Cranage," he answered. "As you know, we've suspected, almost from the first, that somehow or other Lady Renardsmere had got mixed up in this business. You know how she gave me the slip when I came down here. That, of course, made things worse—why should she have wanted to get out of my way unless she'd something to conceal? We tried to find her in London, at her big house in Park Lane, then at one or two fashionable hotels where she sometimes stops—no good at any of these places! She may have been—probably was—at her Park Lane house for an hour or two that afternoon or evening that she slipped off from here, but after that there's no doubt she made off to the

Continent, by way of Dover—I got information that she'd been seen at Dover, at the Lord Warden Hotel, that night."

"You did!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, I did!—I left no stone unturned to find her, because I knew that if I once got hold of her I could get some very necessary information out of her," he answered.

"However, she got away. Well, as you know, some days ago we decided at headquarters to give the widest publicity to all this business, and to take the press into full confidence, and, accordingly, those long accounts of the whole thing, from our angle, appeared, first in the evening, then in the morning newspapers—just at the very date of your adventure with those three fellows whom I've seen this morning in Portsmouth Gaol. Now yesterday I was called upon by the Paris representative of the *Daily Sentinel*—he'd come over to London on business connected with his paper. He told me that the day before he left Paris he had occasion to call at the Hotel Bristol, and that there he saw Lady Renardsmere in conversation with an old Chinese gentleman who was evidently a person of importance. He knew Lady Renardsmere well enough by sight, for he'd been a journalist in London before taking up his duties in Paris, and knew everybody of consequence about town; the Chinese gentleman he didn't know, but like all journalists he was ready enough to find out, and he was soon told that he

was Mr. Cheng, a Chinese financier of very high standing. Now, this man had, of course, read all about these mysteries in the London papers, and had seen Lady Renardsmere's name mentioned, and Mr. Cheng's, so he was naturally interested in seeing them together, and, knowing that he was coming over to London within a few hours, he determined to call on us at Scotland Yard and tell us what he'd seen. But, as he then had a little time to spare, and was well up in the case, which had keenly aroused his interest, he also determined, being on the spot, to give us a bit of practical help. And he did!"

"How?" I asked. "What practical help?"

"Well," continued Jifferdene, "if you read the newspaper story, you'd see that it told straight out that Mr. Cheng was staying at that very Hotel Bristol in Paris when he was robbed of some extraordinarily valuable article—God knows what it may be, for we don't—by his secretary, Chuh Sin. This journalist—smart fellow!—thought he'd try to get some description of Chuh Sin from people at the Hotel Bristol who remembered him. He succeeded in doing so—very easily—and he's furnished me with their account of the man we want so badly: if Mr. Cheng had been frank and open with us, we might have been spared a lot of trouble and there'd have been fewer of these murders. This Chuh Sin is one of those Chinamen who, they say, might very easily pass for a European: he was given to dress very fashionably in Paris, and few people, in their

opinion, would have known him for a Chinaman—though, to be sure, they added, when seen in native dress, which he sometimes wore, the difference in his appearance was striking. As for the rest of him, he speaks French and English perfectly, English without a trace of accent, and is a very astute, ready-mannered person altogether. The hotel manager, who had a good deal of business to transact with him, spoke of him to this journalist as being a very clever man indeed—and I think, Mr. Cranage, we know him to be so!”

“We also know, Jifferdene, that he’s markedly disfigured,” I said. “And so ought to be easily identifiable.”

“Aye!—at close quarters!” he agreed. “But nobody’s ever been at close quarters with him—yet. However, we’re at work. But—what do you suppose Lady Renardsmere was up to with this old Cheng?”

“I’m not going to speculate, Jifferdene,” I answered, “Lady Renardsmere has her own way of doing things and she dislikes and won’t have interference. And—she reads the newspapers—a great reader—and she’ll know, therefore, what’s going on, and her own danger.”

“Danger!” he said. “Aye—if it’s as I suspect, that she’s got mixed up with this, she is in danger, as long as that Chinaman’s going. We’re considering about sending over to Paris to see and warn her—but . . .”

"You'd probably find her gone when, you got there," I said. "My own belief is that she'll not be seen here until just before the Derby."

"The Derby!" he exclaimed. "To be sure, she'll come home for that! Well, there's time for a lot of water to run under London Bridge before that comes off, Mr. Cranage, though it's getting near at hand. Now I'm going." He shook hands and turned towards his cab, but paused again, nodding at the house. "It's a wonder," he said in a confidential whisper, "a wonder—to me—that there's been no attack on *that!*—on *her*, while she was in it. But—it's maybe that he—or they—have only recently known that she was concerned. Supposing——"

"Supposing what, Jifferdene?" I asked.

"Supposing you got a nocturnal visitor in the shape of the Chinaman?" he suggested. "It's possible!"

"There are plenty of men in the house—and fire-arms, too," I answered. "As for myself, I've carried a revolver in my hip-pocket for the last week."

"Well, I think you're wise," he remarked. "Murder stalking at large, eh? Well, we can only do our best, Mr. Cranage. We're trying, whatever you may think."

He went away then, and I returned to Peyton, and to the interminable and profitless discussion. Peyton had become profoundly interested in the affair into which he had been accidentally pitchforked, and being a man of means and leisure had

made up his mind to see it through. Indeed, he could not very well get away from it for a time, for his evidence was necessary at the repeated bringings-up of the three miscreants who were on remand, and whom he and I, Walker and Peggie had to confront from the witness-box until we grew sick of seeing their sullen or defiant countenances. As I could not extend Lady Renardsmere's hospitality to him for ever, Peyton took up his quarters at the Renardsmere Arms, a convenient centre for keeping in touch with me and the police. As I had little to do at that time, he and I were much together, and we spent a great part of each day at Manson Lodge, where Rippling Ruby, guarded day and night as if she had been some Empress whose life and throne were in danger, was completing her preparations for the Derby. This sort of thing was going on when we arrived within one week of the Derby. And the situation then was this: The Chinaman had not been found, nor had the police come across one single trace of him. On the strength of the evidence brought against them, in which the memoranda found on the leader largely figured, the three men had been duly charged with the murders of Holli-ment, Quartermayne and Neamore, and committed for trial at the next assizes: the identity of the leader had been fully established; as for the other two, they still flatly refused to give themselves a name, and up to then the police had not succeeded in finding out who they were. And, perhaps more

important than anything to ourselves, up to then, the Friday before the Epsom Spring Meeting began, neither Peggie Manson nor myself had heard a word more, by letter or telegram, from Lady Renardsmere. But on that Friday the silence was broken.

I was busy with such correspondence as there was that morning—not much had come in during Lady Renardsmere's absence—when, about noon, Burton, the butler, entered. There was an air of mystery about him, mingled, I fancied, with some sense of relief and satisfaction. He came close to my desk, and, quite unnecessarily, whispered——

“Mr. Cranage! Joycey is here, sir—wanting to see you.”

I looked up at him, wonderingly.

“Joycey?” I said. “Who is Joycey?”

“I forgot you didn't know, sir. The butler at Park Lane. I—I think he's a message from her ladyship. For you, Mr. Cranage.”

I got up from my desk—a bit excitedly, no doubt.

“Bring him in at once, then, Burton!” I said. “Has—has he any message for you?”

“For me—no, sir. For you. I—I haven't asked him any questions, sir. If——”

“What, Burton?”

“I wish you could get out of him where her ladyship is, sir! I—the fact is, Mr. Cranage, I'm getting anxious, upset! And Joycey—he's one of those close men—he wouldn't tell me anything—however much I asked! If you, sir——”

"All right, Burton; show him in! Perhaps he's going to clear things up. Anyhow . . ."

I stood by my desk awaiting the Park Lane butler's approach. He came presently; an irreproachably attired person in black, soft-footed, soft-voiced, suave, polite, a pussy-cat sort of man, with the sort of face that you sometimes see in the pulpit of a fashionable church and occasionally under a barrister's wig, and he made me a bow that could not have been more reverential if it had been addressed to Royalty.

"Good morning, Joycey," I said. "You have a message for me?"

"Yes, sir. From her ladyship."

"All right!" said I. "Sit down. What is it?"

He sat down, arranging his silk hat, his gloves, his umbrella to a nicety about him.

"If you would please to wait a few moments, sir," he answered. "The fact is, the message is to you and to Miss Manson, conjointly. Miss Manson was wired to, sir—to be here at noon precisely. It is now within a minute or two of that hour, sir."

"I see!" said I. "The message is to Miss Manson and myself. Very well. Let's see if Miss Manson is coming."

I crossed over to one of the windows and looked out on the drive. Peggie was just cantering up. I went out on the terrace to meet her. She nodded as she jumped off her cob, as much as to signify that she knew what was going on.

"Is he here?" she asked, as she gave the cob over to a footman who had hurried out. "I mean Joycey?"

"He's here in my room," I answered. "Got a message for you and me—conjointly."

"From Lady Renardsmere?" she suggested.

"Who else? Come on—let's hear all about it."

We entered the room together: Joycey rose and did obeisance. I waved him to be seated again, and gave Peggie an easy chair opposite him.

"Now, Joycey!" I said. "We're all attention. What's the message?"

He cleared his throat—reminding me more than ever of a fashionable preacher—and began in a soft, mellifluous voice, almost deprecatory in its cadences.

"From her ladyship, sir—to you and Miss Manson. Her ladyship wishes you to know that she has taken Marengo Lodge, at Epsom, for the race week. From Monday morning next, sir, until the following Saturday morning. I go down there, sir, with a sufficient staff of servants from the Park Lane house early on Monday. Her ladyship will be obliged to you, sir, if you will go there on Monday afternoon, at any time convenient to yourself, sir, so long as you arrive in time for dinner, which will be served at seven o'clock."

He paused, looking enquiringly at me.

"Quite so, Joycey," I said. "Tell Lady Renardsmere I'll be there—well before dinner."

"I am obliged to you, sir," went on the bland

voice. Its owner turned himself more particularly to Peggie. "Her ladyship's compliments to Miss Manson and Miss Hepple," he continued. "Her ladyship will be pleased if Miss Manson and Miss Hepple will be her guests at Marengo Lodge during the race week, from Monday to Saturday."

Once more the enquiring look. Peggie glanced at me, and then nodded at the emissary.

"Very kind of Lady Renardsmere, I'm sure," she said. "Tell Lady Renardsmere Miss Hepple and I will accept her invitation, Joycey. It comes at the right moment, for I hadn't made up my mind what to do, or where to stay. Yes—we'll come!"

"I am much obliged to you, miss," said the voice. "Might I ask you, also, miss, to arrive in time for dinner on Monday?"

"You might, Joycey, and we will," answered Peggie. "We'll arrive during the afternoon."

"Thank you, miss. I have but one more message," the voice continued, and relapsed into its repeating-a-carefully-learnt-lesson tone. "To Miss Manson. Lady Renardsmere is confident that, with the staff of private detectives and her own staff at her command, Miss Manson will in every way carefully safeguard Rippling Ruby on her journey from Manson Lodge until she is stabled at Epsom."

"You can tell Lady Renardsmere, Joycey, that Miss Manson will do all that!" said Peggie, with a laugh. "Rippling Ruby will travel in the thick of such a bodyguard as no Derby candidate ever had

before or ever will have again—a quite unnecessarily large one, in my opinion. You can tell Lady Renardsmere, too, that I've made all arrangements for Rippling Ruby's stabling at Epsom, and that she'll be watched and guarded every blessed second until she's saddled for the Derby. And you can tell her, too, Joycey, that she'll win by more lengths than I can guess at!"

"I am obliged to you, miss—I am obliged to you, sir. That's all, sir," said the voice. Its owner rose, bowed and glanced at the door. "I beg respectfully to wish you and Miss Manson a good morning, sir."

"Thank you, Joycey—same to you," said I. "But—a moment! You've given your message and got our replies, which you're evidently going to take to Lady Renardsmere. Is her ladyship in town?"

The suave, bland countenance became inscrutable; the voice, when it sounded, had a touch of frost in it.

"That I am not at liberty to say, sir."

"She will, of course, be at Marengo Lodge?"

"I am not at liberty to say that, either, sir."

"But—won't there be other guests than ourselves there? A house-party, eh?"

"There will be no other guests than Miss Hepple, Miss Manson and yourself, sir, at Marengo Lodge."

I turned and looked at Peggie, and Peggie turned on the butler.

"But surely Lady Renardsmere's going to see her own horse run!" she exclaimed. "She's going to Epsom, surely, surely——"

"I have no information on the point, miss," answered Joycey. "I am not at liberty to make any statements other than those I have already made. I am merely a messenger, miss. And having discharged my mission——"

"All right, Joycey!" I said. "We won't keep you. We will all be at Marengo Lodge on Monday afternoon. Now I suppose Burton will look after you before you go back to town?"

"Thank you, sir," he answered. "Burton and I are very good friends, and I shall be safe in his hands, sir." He retreated to the door after another bow. But with his hand on it, he suddenly became entirely human. He looked at Peggie, and a half-shy, half-humorous smile stole round the corners of his lips. "I suppose the filly's bound to win, miss?" he asked. "Dead certainty, eh?"

"Dead!" said Peggie, solemnly. "Nothing can beat her! Why, Joycey, have you been backing her?"

He nodded reflectively, and his eyes took a far-away look.

"I stand to win a lot of money, miss," he answered simply. "I was fortunate enough to get decent prices as far back as last Autumn, and I have continued to invest up to recently, when, of course, the price shortened. I shall be very comfortably off,

miss, if the Renardsmere colours are first past the post next Wednesday. But if not . . .”

He made a sepulchral grimace, shook his head, remembered himself, became once more transformed into the perfectly-trained serving-man, bowed and disappeared. Peggie and I looked at each other.

“What’s it all mean?” she said. “Isn’t she going to turn up at Epsom?”

“I shall be more astonished than I ever have been in my life if she doesn’t!” I answered. “This is merely another of her eccentricities. She’ll present herself at Marengo Lodge on Monday—or Tuesday—as sure as fate! By-the-bye, do you know Marengo Lodge?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Well enough! It’s an old, picturesque house in the lower part of the town, in a thickly-wooded garden. Its owner lets it for the race week. It’s big enough for a large house-party.”

“Then it’ll comfortably hold three of us!” I said. “I’m going to enjoy it. I’m a bit sick of sticking here, and I don’t care how soon Monday and some excitement comes. We’ve had too much of the wrong sort of excitement lately.”

“You’ll get some excitement on Wednesday, my boy!” she laughed. “Wait and see!”

But I was to get some before then, and of yet another sort. That very evening I got a message from the police authorities—the leader of the three arrested men desired urgently to see me.

CHAPTER XXI

WARNING

It was Spiller, the Portsmouth detective, who brought me this surprising intimation. He came to Renardsmere House a few hours after the Park Lane butler had gone away, and I saw at once, from his manner, that he had got something mysterious to communicate.

Peyton was with me when he arrived, but it was evident that Spiller was not going to speak before any third party, and I carried him off to another room.

"What now, Spiller?" said I, as I shut the door. "Further developments?"

He gave me a queer look and tapped my shoulder.

"Macfarlane!" he said. "Macfarlane, Mr. Cranage! That's why I'm here."

Macfarlane was the name by which the leader of the three men under remand was known. Whether it was his real name or not, I don't know; it was the name, at any rate, by which he had gone during his inglorious career as doctor's assistant at Portsmouth, and by which he had allowed himself to be called during the proceedings before the magistrate.

"What about Macfarlane?" I asked. "Not—escaped?"

"Escaped!" he answered with a laugh. "Not much, Mr. Cranage! Small chance of that for any one of that lot! No—he wants to see you."

"Wants to see me!" I exclaimed. "Why?"

"That's only known to himself," he answered. "He's been pestering the governor to let him see you for this last day or two. He's got something highly important to tell you. And—I came over to let you know."

"Something of a private nature?" I suggested.

"Don't know—haven't the faintest idea—what it may be," replied Spiller. "But as to privacy, you can't see him alone. There'll be a warder, or warders, present. However, for his purpose, warders might be chairs or tables. The thing is—will you come?"

"I suppose I ought to," I said. "What would you do?"

"I should—certainly," he answered. "You never know what you might hear. He's seen nobody—not even a solicitor—since he and the other two were committed, but now he's something more than keen about seeing you. That's a sure proof that he's got something to tell that's worth hearing."

"Well—when, then?" I asked.

"Meet me outside the gaol—main entrance—tomorrow morning at twelve," he said. "I'll fix everything for you. You can motor over there, Mr. Cranage?"

"Yes," I answered. "I'll be there. Twelve—noon."

He went away soon afterwards, and I returned to Peyton and told him of Macfarlane's desire to see me.

"Surely he's not going to make a confession?—to me!" I said. "That would be——"

"No confession!" interrupted Peyton. "My notion about that man is that he'll go to the end without a word as to the main business. He's played his game and lost—and he'll take his beating without a grumble. No—he's something to tell. Like to know what it is, too! It'll be something out of the common."

We settled that Peyton should go with me in the morning and wait in the car until I had seen Macfarlane. Walker drove us in, and at noon I stepped down at the prison door and found Spiller waiting. Ten minutes later I found myself alone in a drab-coloured cell-like room, across the middle of which was a double row of bars. And presently, after a grating of keys in locks and clanging of bolts, in came Macfarlane, with one warder at his side and another in the cage between him and me.

I looked at him with a feeling of intense curiosity. He was little changed. There was something of the air of the trapped animal about him, but he threw off all consciousness of his surroundings and nodded to me as if we were meeting under very commonplace circumstances.

"Good morning, Mr. Cranage," he said, coming close to the bars. "I'm obliged to you for coming."

"You have something to tell me?" I answered.

"Yes," he said. Then he paused, looking at me steadily. "A question first. Do you know where Lady Renardsmere is?"

"No!" I replied. "I do not!"

"I've kept count of days," he went on, with a grim smile. "Next Wednesday is Derby Day. Shall you see Lady Renardsmere before Wednesday?"

"I can't say," I answered. "I hope to."

"But at any rate, you can see Miss Manson whenever you like?—within an hour or two from now?" he said, almost eagerly. "That's so, isn't it?"

"That's certainly so!" I assented. "This very afternoon, if need be."

He nodded, as if with some satisfaction, and seemed to get closer to the bars which he was clutching.

"I'm tied up!" he said, with a sardonic laugh. "This adventure ends—here!—for the time being, anyway. Lost—by a good many lengths! But I've always been a sport, Cranage, and I'm a sport to the end. And if you can't get in immediate touch with Lady Renardsmere you can with Miss Manson. So, here's what I wanted to tell you—as a sport. *The filly's in danger!*"

I started back from my bars, in sheer astonishment: I believe the two warders, stolid-faced, im-

passive fellows that they were, started too—I'm certain, anyhow, that all three of us stared at Macfarlane; stared as if he'd offered us some unbelievable news.

"What?" I exclaimed. "Rippling Ruby!"

"Rippling Ruby!" he answered with a nod. "I tell you—in danger!"

"In danger of what?" I asked. "Interference?"

"Interference that'll make it impossible for her to win," he replied coolly. "And I'm held by the leg here, and I'm a sport, and all the rest of it's over, and the filly's the finest bit of horse-flesh I ever saw—and damn it, I'm telling you!" he suddenly burst out. "Get to Miss Manson, man, and tell her to watch her charge, herself, every minute from now till they get her saddled and off! Watch—watch!"

I found it difficult to get a word out after that. I stood tongue-tied, staring at him.

"I'm telling you, Cranage!" he repeated. "Telling you!"

"But," I stammered at last, "the filly's been watched day and night for weeks! There's a special guard of private detectives——"

"Damn the special guard of private detectives!" he interrupted irritably. "I'm telling you what I know, Cranage. Get away at once and tell Miss Manson! Let you, and her, and that American fellow take it in turns to keep your own eyes on Rippling Ruby till she's literally at the starting-gate, or . . ."

He suddenly paused, and a queer look came into his sinister eyes. And just as suddenly he laughed, and when he spoke again it was in a cynical, sardonic fashion.

"Never did a good turn to man or woman in my life, Cranage, that I remember!" he said. "Been kicked and cuffed about too much since boyhood myself! But—it does me good, somehow, to think I'm doing a good turn to—a pretty bit of horse-flesh! That's all, Cranage. Be off!"

He turned swiftly away: the next minute I was alone. And I went swiftly away, too, out of that grim and gloomy place, and back to Spiller... and to Peyton, waiting in the big car at the gates.

Spiller gave me a searching look. Inquisitiveness was written big all over him. But this was my business.

"All right, Spiller," I said, as I made straight into the car. "I've seen him, and heard what he had to say. And—it's of a strictly private nature. Good-morning!—get away out of the town, Walker!"

We had cleared the outskirts of the town before I said one word to Peyton. Then, a few miles out, at an old-fashioned roadside inn, I made Walker pull up, and bidding Peyton get out, I took him into a private room and over a crust of bread and cheese and a glass of ale, told him everything.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

"That what he says is probably true!" he answered.

"But how?—why?" I exclaimed. "What's the filly got to do with all this murdering business? How does she come in?"

"Lady Renardsmere comes in," he said. "She's owner."

I made an effort to reckon things up.

"You don't mean—revenge?" I asked suddenly.

"May be something of that," he assented. "This is it, Cranage—you don't know, nobody knows—what you're up against. That fellow you've just seen knows a lot more than he's told. Queer kink in the man's character!—that he's told you this much. But he has told! Act!"

"How?" I said. "How?"

"Straight to Miss Manson, and tell her every word of it," he answered. "He made a suggestion. The three of us were to watch, day and night, till Wednesday. I'll take my share."

"I suppose you and I could do it between us?" I said. "You by day, I by night. If that doesn't make things safe, with all those detectives, and the stable-lads, and all the rest of it . . ."

"Let's slip along to Manson Lodge," he said. "The sooner she knows, the better. But, Cranage . . ."

He paused, shaking his head, and pursing his lips.

"What?" I asked.

"It's the Chinaman again!" he answered. "He's

at the bottom of this! Macfarlane's given him away on this point, but—it's the Chinaman! There's some secret doings, secret knowledge behind everything—what is it? Seems to me the Chinaman and this gang of his have been one day too late all through—too late with Holliment, too late with Quartervayne, too late with Neamore, too late with Pennithwaite! But—Macfarlane evidently knows that though he and the other two are caged, the Chinaman's at large—and has a trump card up his sleeve! What? Connected with this race-horse and Lady Renardsmere! And Lady Renardsmere's in the shadows. But the filly isn't! Come on—let's get to Miss Manson."

We walked into the dining-room at Manson Lodge as Peggie and Miss Hepple were just sitting down to lunch. They pressed us to join them, but we were both far too concerned—excited, in my case—to eat, and I was impatient enough until Peggie had cleared her parlourmaid out of the room and we four were alone. Then I told the whole tale. It produced different effects on its two hearers. Miss Hepple grew graver and graver—but Peggie waxed more and more impatient and angry.

"The whole thing's absolutely preposterous!" she burst out, when I had made an end of the story. "It's as impossible that the filly can be interfered with as that—as that—oh, I can't think of a simile! I never heard such nonsense! No horse that ever breathed has been so much looked after. How could

anybody get at her? There's me, to start with!—I'm worn nearly to skin and bone looking after her. There's Bradgett!—he's lost flesh in his anxiety about her. There's her own boy—I've had literally to drive him away from her to get food and sleep. There are all my men and lads always round about. And there are those six private detectives, eating their heads off at Lady Renardsmere's expense, on guard night and day!—the whole thing's ridiculous. She's never put her nose out of her box without a score of pairs of eyes being on her—never walked or galloped a furlong without being attended as if she were the King going to open Parliament—I tell you, it's been and is a sheer impossibility for anybody to get near her! It's rot!"

"I think not!" said Peyton, quietly. "Not!"

Peggie laid down her knife and fork and looked at him. Her face had been all aflame with undeniable temper, but under Peyton's steady gaze it regained its normal colour, and I saw that she had suddenly calmed down.

"I think you're a commonsense man, Mr. Peyton," she said in level tones. "Now, then, why do you think it isn't rot?—when I think it is!"

"Because I don't regard it from your angle," he answered. "It's not that pretty bit of horseflesh on the other side your grounds there that's to be got at—it's Lady Renardsmere that's to be got at through her. This man that's lurking in the shadow, striking at nothing to get what he wants, has doubtless long

since discovered that Lady Renardsmere is mixed up in this thing, and has very likely threatened her unless she gives up the thing that he wants, and that he believes her, or somebody known to her, to be in possession of. How do you know what mayn't have transpired, secretly, between him and her? Why does she hide? And why, all of a sudden, did she double the number of private detectives about her horse? No!—it isn't rot! There's danger—as this man Macfarlane said to Cranage."

"What danger?" demanded Peggie.

"If I could answer that, there'd be no danger," he replied. "I do not know what the danger is. But if I were you, I'd guard against it, still further. After all, it's only for four days now."

"But what more can one do?" exclaimed Peggie, showing renewed symptoms of irascibility. "I can't fasten the creature up in a steel safe, or stable her in the drawing-room! Nobody ever took the precautions that I've taken. My father's trained three Derby and five St. Leger winners in his time, and he'd have burst with laughter if he'd seen the way in which this filly has been looked after. Why _____,"

"The circumstances are exceptional, my dear," interrupted Miss Hepple.

"Don't talk platitudes, Aunt Millie!" retorted Peggie. "We all know that the circumstances—confound them!—are exceptional. The thing is—what more can I do than I am doing? A whole regiment

of men and boys round the creature!—what can I do beyond that? If only people would be reasonable——”

She glanced at me, drumming the table with the tips of her fingers, and there was that in her look which made me begin to think anew.

“After all,” I said, with a glance at Peyton, “I don’t see what more Miss Manson could do! The filly’s being watched steadily, uninterruptedly, day and night——”

“I’ll tell you precisely what the arrangements are,” interrupted Peggie. “As for daytime, there’s never less than a dozen pairs of eyes either on her or on her door. At night, either Bradgett or her own boy is always with her; one of the detectives is in the only room by which access can be had to her box, and two others patrol the yard outside. What more could one do?”

“Precious little!” said I. “But let Peyton and myself do that little. We’re willing to keep watch, alternately, from now until you take her off to Ep-som. It’s Peyton’s suggestion.”

“It’s very kind of Mr. Peyton—of both of you,” answered Peggie. “If you want my candid opinion, as Rippling Ruby’s trainer, it’s absolutely unnecessary. But if it’ll give you any peace of mind—mine isn’t even upset!—do it. Make your own arrangements—and yourselves at home, here. And now for goodness’ sake, shut up about all this nonsense, and have a drink!”

Peyton and I made our arrangements—after consultation with Bradgett and the detectives. They were simple—he was to sit up, at the stables, one night; I, the next; I to be on guard one day; he, the following—as supernumeraries. We followed this plan—and nothing happened.

Nothing, at any rate, until soon after midnight on Sunday, at which time I was smoking and chatting with one of the detectives in the room outside Rippling Ruby's box.

Suddenly one of the men who patrolled the grounds came in.

"There's a man outside—very much covered up—who says you'll know him, Mr. Cranage," he said. "Will you come out and take a look at him?"

He picked up a lantern that stood ready lighted, and I went out with him into the yard.

There stood a heavily-coated and muffled figure, in charge of the other detective. There was no need to shine the light on him, for at sight of me he spoke.

"Good evening, sir," said a familiar voice. "It's I, Mr. Cranage—Joycey!"

"Joycey!" I exclaimed. "Good heavens!—what brings you here at this hour? Is Lady Renards—mere——"

He interrupted me by turning and pointing across the grounds to the highroad that ran across the Downs, a quarter of a mile away. There I could see the powerful headlights of an automobile.

"I came down in that sir," he said. "And I'm

returning in it in a few minutes, as soon as I've done what I came to do. Her ladyship's orders, sir. I'm to take a look—just a look—at the filly, sir.”

“Dear me!” said I. “What!—to see that she's alive?”

“My orders, sir, are simply to see that she's there,” he answered. “I told these two men so before you were fetched out.”

I turned to the two detectives.

“This is Lady Renardsmere's butler at her house in Park Lane,” I said. “You hear what his mistress's orders are. And there's no need to call Miss Manson—I'll take the responsibility.”

We went into the stables and to Rippling Ruby's box, with a couple of lanterns. The stable-boy who slept there rose and blinked at us: Rippling Ruby herself turned her great liquid eyes on the lights. And Joycey gave her but one look, and drew back.

“That's quiet sufficient, gentlemen,” he said. “That's all I was ordered to do. I thank you!”

He muffled himself up again and went out: I walked a few yards with him across the grounds.

“Queer proceeding, Joycey!” I remarked.

“Many of her ladyship's proceedings are truly remarkable, sir,” he answered suavely. “It's not for me to understand them—or to question them. And—it's Monday morning already, sir. You're due at Marengo Lodge this afternoon, sir. Don't

be late for dinner, sir—I can promise you . . . a good one!”

Then, without another word he went swiftly away towards the brilliant headlights, leaving me more amazed than ever.

CHAPTER XXII

MARENGO LODGE

NONE of us, discussing the matter next morning, could make head or tail of Joyce's nocturnal visit to Manson Lodge. What particular purpose could possibly be served by his sticking his head for half a minute into Rippling Ruby's box and seeing that she was there?

The thing was mysterious in the highest degree, and we only got one piece of satisfaction out of it—the certainty that Lady Renardsmere was somewhere close at hand, whether that closeness meant London or not. But Peyton, discussing matters with me in private, broached a theory of his own.

"This old Lady Renardsmere now, Cranage," he said, eyeing me closely, "undeniably eccentric, eh?"

"You can write that down as a dead certainty!" I answered.

"Well," he continued, slowly, "when people get to a certain age, and they've been eccentric all their lives, I guess there comes a time when mere eccentricity changes into something very like—not quite insanity, but a state nearly approaching it."

"You think Lady Renardsmere's mad?" I suggested bluntly.

"Maybe she's gone mad on one point," he said. "She's doing some queer things. The only question is—is it madness, or is it method? What's she up to? I'm getting very anxious to set eyes on her."

"I shall be astonished if you don't do that this evening or to-morrow," I said. "She must turn up at Epsom! Her own horse! And—as far as I could gather—she's as keen about winning the Derby as an owner can be—more than keen!"

"Yes," he remarked thoughtfully, "I've gathered that—perhaps in a way you don't quite understand. Well—we migrate to this Epsom place to-day, don't we? I'm seeing it right through, Cranage!—I'm going along with the procession, and I'll put up at some hotel there, and stand by till the thing's over. Say!—I don't know much about these racing matters—what is there that's likely to give the filly any trouble about carrying off this big race?"

"There's a horse called Jack Cade, and another called Flotsam, and another called Roneo, and there's a filly named Hedgesparrow, all well up in the betting," I answered. "Jack Cade's the big danger—he won the Two Thousand Guineas. But he's at four to one this morning, and Rippling Ruby is at evens—she'll start at odds on, and carry an awful lot of money then! Miss Manson says nothing can beat her, and I should say the stable has backed her so much that it hasn't a penny left! If all goes well, we shall see her win in a canter!"

"Interesting!" he said approvingly. "Well, I've never engaged in an adventure of this sort before, it kind of makes you feel big to be allowed to join in! But the care and attention that this creature's getting!—might be an Empress going to be crowned!"

Anyone who witnessed the migration of Rippling Ruby from Manson Lodge to Epsom that day might well have agreed with Peyton. We took her across country in a special motor-van—into which, by-the-bye, nobody but Peggie and her own special boy could coax her—surrounded by a larger entourage than surely ever attended horseflesh before. There were two of the private detectives in the van; the other four followed in a car; there was a second car containing Bradgett and three of his chief lads; a third carried Peggie, Miss Hepple, Peyton, myself and our luggage. We made a non-stop run over the Sussex and Surrey Downs to the stable at Epsom where Rippling Ruby was to be housed; none of us departed until we had seen her safe in her quarters and her guards set for the night and every precaution arranged for. And then Miss Hepple, Peggie and I went off to our own quarters at Marengo Lodge, and Peyton walked into the town to find a hotel. So far everything had gone beautifully, and Macfarlane's warning had not justified itself: Rippling Ruby was safe on the scene of action, and so strictly under watch and ward that we saw no chance of danger.

Marengo Lodge, to which I and my companions

drove up at five o'clock that Monday afternoon, proved to be an old-fashioned red-brick mansion of considerable size, set in grounds which, if anything, were far too thickly encumbered with shrubs and trees. Outwardly it had rather a gloomy appearance, but it was comfortable enough within, and that we should be well looked after during our five days' stay there I saw at once, for Joycey had brought down a number of servants, both men and women, from Park Lane, and when we arrived everything was running on well-oiled wheels. A housekeeper carried off Miss Hepple and Peggie to their rooms, and Joycey, who had received us at the hall-door, drew me aside.

"I have a message for you, sir," he said. "From her ladyship. Her ladyship, sir, has kept herself informed, by means of the newspapers, of many things that have transpired since she was at Renardsmere. She has read, sir, of the young American gentleman, Mr. Peyton, and of his rescue of you and Miss Manson. She directs me to tell you, sir, that if Mr. Peyton is at Epsom, or coming to the races, she wishes you to invite him to Marengo Lodge as your fellow-guest, with her compliments. I have two adjacent rooms already prepared for you and him, sir,—I thought, if he came, you'd like to be close together."

"That's very kind of Lady Renardsmere, Joycey," I replied. "Mr. Peyton is in the town, looking for a hotel—I'll go out and find him and bring him

back. But look here!—is Lady Renardsmere coming here to-night?”

“I am not at liberty, sir, to say anything about her ladyship’s movements,” he answered, with a solemn shake of his head. “Still, this I can say, sir,—her ladyship will not be here for dinner. There will be just Miss Hepple, Miss Manson, yourself, sir, and Mr. Peyton—if he accepts her ladyship’s invitation.”

“I’ll get hold of him at once,” I said. “Of course, you saw Lady Renardsmere when you got back to town during the night, Joycey?”

But Joycey was not to be drawn. His countenance became sphinx-like.

“Anything relating to her ladyship, I am not allowed to discuss, sir,” he answered. “You will find everything here to your liking, sir, I am sure. It is her ladyship’s wish that you should act as host here, sir, and Miss Hepple, as senior of the two ladies, as hostess. All the servants are instructed to that effect, sir.”

I left him and went off into the little town, in search of Peyton. I drew two hotels blank, but ran him to earth on the steps of a third. He stood there with his hands in his pockets, his suit-case at his feet, looking rather disconsolate.

“Say!” he exclaimed, as I hurried up. “There isn’t a room to be had for love or money in any of these hotels!—they’re all full. They say here I’d better go into London, and come down to the races of a morning—not a room to be had in the place!”

"That's all right," I said. "I've just got an invitation for you—from Lady Renardsmere. You're to come to Marengo Lodge as her guest. So—come on!"

"Is she there?" he asked as he picked up his suitcase.

"No!—and I don't know where she is," I replied. "It's all mystery. But—I feel pretty certain she'll turn up there—and perhaps to-night."

"Well, it's very handsome of her to ask me," he said. "I'd certainly rather be on the spot in this place, and see what goes on than have to go for the nights into London. But why isn't she stopping at this Marengo Lodge?"

"Don't ask me!" I replied. "I've given it all up! I'm only concerned now with what happens from one hour to another. The next thing is to tidy ourselves up for dinner."

We went back to the house. Joycey showed us up to two remarkably well-appointed bedrooms, and told off a footman to look after us. In due course we descended to a drawing-room and joined Miss Hepple and Peggie. At seven o'clock we dined, and Joycey fulfilled his midnight promise to me and gave us a very fine dinner. And at nine, Peggie, Peyton and I went up to Rippling Ruby's quarters and found all right and everything as it should be. We went back then to Marengo Lodge, and played a rubber of whist with Miss Hepple, and that over we all went to our respective rooms . . . each of us

still wondering when we were going to see Lady Renardsmere.

We—that is to say, we three younger people—were out on the Downs very early next morning, to see Rippling Ruby at exercise. Two or three of the other Derby candidates had also arrived; we had a look at them—so, too, did a good many other early birds. Jack Cade, brought from a Northern stable, was there—a fine animal, but after Peggie had seen him she declared abruptly that Rippling Ruby—with whose jockey, Medderfield, Peyton and I made acquaintance that morning—would win as she liked. So, too, evidently thought the sporting fraternity, for before noon in Epsom it was difficult to get money on Rippling Ruby, except at odds on, while Jack Cade went back to six to one, Flotsam to seven, and the others to anything. There was likely to be a field of from twelve to fifteen runners next day, and out of the lot nothing but Jack Cade looked really dangerous to our chance.

We all went to that, the opening day's proceedings. I had never been at an Epsom race meeting before; neither, of course, had Peyton; the scenes on the Downs, so familiar to Peggie, to racegoers, and to a vast number of Londoners were absolutely strange to both of us. But we were not greatly interested in them; the fact was, our anxieties would not allow us to be. We felt safe and reassured about Rippling Ruby; the guardianship of her was stricter than ever; but we wanted

to see her owner. Provided by Peggie with facilities for going anywhere and everywhere in stands and paddocks, Peyton and I made an exhaustive search of the whole place during the afternoon: Peggie, on her part, did a similar thing. But when the last race had been run—and I confess that I scarcely saw a bit of racing that first day—and we were going home to Marengo Lodge, not one of us had seen Lady Renardsmere.

“I’ve had no end of enquiries about her during the afternoon,” remarked Peggie, who had gone racing in her best bib-and-tucker and looked unbelievably grand. “And it was a bit trying for me, as her trainer, to have to say that I didn’t know whether she was going to turn up to-morrow or not. However, if she doesn’t——”

She paused so long then that Peyton asked her to finish her sentence.

“What?—if she doesn’t?” he enquired.

“Oh!—I can lead Rippling Ruby in myself!” she answered.

Peyton laughed at her tone of assurance.

“You’ve no doubt about her winning!” he said, teasingly. “Foregone conclusion, eh?”

Peggie looked at him from under her smart hat.

“Doubt!” she exclaimed. “What’s to beat her? There’s nothing *can* beat her! And if Lady Renardsmere is ass enough not to be there to see her win—well then, I’ll take what Lady Renardsmere won’t—all the honour of it!”

"Good!" said Peyton. "But—it strikes me we shall see Lady Renardsmere to-night."

He seemed confident about that, somehow, in his queer way. But Lady Renardsmere had not arrived at Marengo Lodge when we got in, nor was there any news of her, nor had she come by dinner-time. And knowing that it was useless to do so, nobody asked Joycey any questions about her.

We dined later than usual that Tuesday evening, and the darkness had fallen outside before dinner was over. We were just rising from table and talking about going round to see Rippling Ruby when Miss Hepple, who sat facing a big window that looked out on the grounds, suddenly started from her chair with a sharp scream.

"There! Quick!" she cried. "The window! A man's face. Look!"

Neither blinds nor curtains had been drawn across the window; the room itself was brilliantly lighted; outside the window the gardens and grounds lay black. It seemed to me as I slewed round in my chair, following the direction of Miss Hepple's shaking, pointed finger, that I saw something like the ghost of a face, at one corner, and the movement of a dark body as the ghost-like thing disappeared, Peyton saw, too, and whether he had quicker and sharper vision than I or not, he let out a smothered exclamation as he leapt to his feet.

"The Chinaman!"

Then his hand slipped round to his hip-pocket,

and he made a dash for the window, while I, thinking it quicker, dashed out of the room, through the hall and into the garden. We met, on a sort of terrace that lay between the dining-room and the grounds. Met . . . to stare at each other in the glare of light from the room, and then at the gloom all round us.

"Cranage, that was he, as sure as fate!" muttered Peyton. "Sure!"

"The Chinaman?" I gasped.

"I saw his face—for the fraction of a second," he answered. "He's slipped off, of course. And what good is it searching the grounds? Out there," he went on, pointing to the furthest part of the garden, "out there, as you know, there are open fields, then those coppices, and beyond that, thick wood—I've noticed all that since we came, yesterday. But he's here! Here!"

"Looking for Lady Renardsmere, of course," said I. "Still, he may be lurking about. Let's have a look round."

"Useless!" he said. "But if you like——"

I went back into the house, told Joyceey briefly of what had occurred, and taking a couple of the men-servants, returned to Peyton. We went cautiously round garden and grounds, and found nothing.

"Never expected to," remarked Peyton, as we made for the house again. "He got his look through the window and went off. But—we now know that he's here—in Epsom."

"The police!" I suggested. "We might tell them."

"Not much good, I should think," he answered. "He'll find it easy enough to lie close in those woods. Besides—the number of people there are about!—sleeping out on those Downs, I understand? Take a battalion of police to search for one man—to-night."

We went back to Miss Hepple and Peggie. Peggie had already got into a hat and coat.

"I'm going up to-the stable," she said. "Chinaman or no Chinaman, and whether he wants to cut Lady Renardsmere's throat or not, I'm going to see the filly! That's my job."

"I'll go with you," said I. "Perhaps you'll stay with Miss Hepple, Peyton?"

He nodded his acquiescence, and presently Peggie and I set out. Marengo Lodge was at the bottom of the town: Rippling Ruby was stabled near the course, up on the Downs; we had some little distance to walk, and up a dark lane, too.

"Do you really think that was the Chinaman?" asked Peggie, when we'd got fairly off. "Did you see him, Jim?"

"I saw what I'm sure was a face," I answered. "Just saw it—and saw something move away. I've no doubt it was the Chinaman—after Lady Renardsmere. That shows he's here—on the spot."

She made no answer for a while. We walked rapidly up the dark lane.

"Lady Renardsmere must look after herself," she

exclaimed suddenly. "But the filly!—I think it'd break my heart if anything happened to her!"

"But you've felt sure nothing can happen to her," I said. "You've laughed at any idea of it!"

Again she was silent for a few moments; again she spoke suddenly.

"I don't know why," she said, "I'm a bit—depressed. I feel as if something was going to happen. Excitement, perhaps, but——"

"Shall I stop at the stable to-night?" I suggested. "I will, if——"

"No—no!" she said. "There's no need. All those men!—and Bradgett. I trust Bradgett beyond everybody. No!—it's ridiculous! Of course, the filly's safe as safe can be!"

She seemed safe enough when we saw her, ten minutes later. It was difficult to imagine how any harm could possibly come to her. Peggie cheered up on seeing her, and we went back to Marengo Lodge, feeling that, after all, everything was all right.

It was then ten o'clock. The four of us sat discussing matters until half-past. Then, just as Miss Hepple had announced her intention of retiring, we heard the whirr of a powerful automobile outside on the drive; then voices at the door and in the hall; within a moment Joycey threw open the door of the dining-room and stood aside . . .

Lady Renardsmere . . . and behind her, in the hall, two big, burly, stern-faced men in plain clothes—clearly, her bodyguard.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BURMA RUBY

WE all rose to our feet as Lady Renardsmere walked into the room. Sheer astonishment at her sudden appearance kept us silent—and staring. Before Joycey could retire, she turned sharply on him, pointing with what was doubtless one of her old imperious stage gestures to the window whereat an hour before we had seen the Chinaman's face.

"Pull down those blinds and draw those curtains!" she commanded. "Close."

Then she turned to us, motioning us to seat ourselves. Like school-children, awed by the movement of a magisterial finger, we obeyed; she herself dropped into a chair at the side of the table.

"Go away and shut the door, Joycey," she went on, as the butler having discharged his task came back from the window. "See to those men outside—if they want a drink, give them one, but see that they don't leave the hall. Cranage!—lock the door after Joycey. Now," she continued, when I had turned the key. "I hope all you people are comfortable and are being well looked after? That's the American man, no doubt?—I hope I see you well,

sir? Peggie Manson!—the filly's all right, I suppose?—right and fit?"

"The filly's all right, Lady Renardsmere, and as fit as she can be," replied Peggie. "I saw her myself within the hour. She's safely guarded and will be till it's all over. You can go and look at her yourself if you like."

Lady Renardsmere made no answer to this invitation. She was undoing a big heavy cloak which wrapped her from head to foot; as she threw it back from her shoulders with one hand she pointed with the other to the table in front of her.

"Come and sit round this table, all of you," she said. "I want to have a talk to you—all. That's why I've come down to-night. Come!"

Under pretence of drawing chairs up to the table for Miss Hepple and Peggie, Peyton contrived to get close to me. And he whispered a word in my ear which only I caught.

"Mad!"

I wasn't sure that he wasn't right. There was a queer look in Lady Renardsmere's eyes; a strangeness in her manner; a strange jerkiness about her movements. And as I sat down opposite her I began to watch her steadily. Yet her voice was firm enough, and her words coherent enough, and there was the old, familiar, brusque, peremptory tone. Still . . .

"You're all wondering what I've been after since I left Renardsmere," she said when we had gathered

round the table. "I'll tell you! I've been making sure of something that I was bound to possess—something that'll make my winning the Derby to-morrow a dead sure thing. This!"

With a sudden swift movement she drew from the folds of her gown a package of soft white tissue paper and placed it on the table before her. With equally swift movements she tore the paper away, and revealed a slender, snake-like belt of bright green leather, in the centre of which was a round brooch-like thing, a sort of medallion of solid-gold. And in the centre of that was set a magnificent blood-red stone, at sight of which Miss Hepple let out a sharp cry.

"A ruby!"

"The Burma Ruby!" said Lady Renardsmere. "The finest ruby in the world! There never was such a ruby. And—mine! Look at it! Touch it! Handle it!"

But not one of us put out a hand. I suppose the others were thinking what I was thinking. Here, before us, baleful and suggestive in the glare of the electric light above our heads, was the thing that had caused murder! Between it and me rose the ghost-faces of four dead men . . .

"Rippling Ruby will carry that to-morrow!" said Lady Renardsmere. "She'll wear it round her neck—nothing can beat her, wearing that! It's a magic stone—a fetish! If she were half-trained she'd win, with that on her! Round her neck, to-morrow!"

I looked round at my three companions. It was not difficult to see that the opinion which Peyton had formed so quickly was already shaping itself in the minds of Miss Hepple and Peggie—each was staring at Lady Renardsmere as if fascinated—and frightened.

And I was frightened myself; frightened of the whole thing; frightened of what might come next. For there was that in Lady Renardsmere's manner, increasing with every moment, which suggested strange things; she sat there looking from one to the other of us, with burning eyes, toying with the green belt and the blood-red stone in its gold setting . . .

"Listen!" she said suddenly, bending over the table towards us. "I'll tell you all about it! This was once a sacred stone!—it was set, it with another, now vanished, in a certain idol. It was broken out—out of the eye-sockets. It went through strange adventures. It came at last into the hands of a group of Chinese financiers—they paid a great price for it. One of them, Cheng, coming to Europe on business, brought it with him, thinking to sell it to some English or American millionaire. It was stolen from Cheng in Paris by his secretary, Chuh Sin. It was stolen from Chuh Sin in Portsmouth by a man named Holliment; who had another man, Quartermayne, in league with him. Holliment and Quartermayne escaped to London with it, and took another man, Neamore, into their confidence about

it. Neamore had once had business with me, under another name, about diamonds: he came to me and offered the stone. I bought it from him and Holliment and Quartervayne: I gave them ten thousand pounds for it. They deceived me: I believed they'd the right to sell. But they were punished!—Chuh Sin and a gang he'd got together were on their track, and Holliment and Quartervayne and Neamore were murdered. Then I found out the truth—and I got the ruby away from Pennithwaite's, where I'd sent it for safe keeping, and went off to find Cheng. I found him—in Paris. And I persuaded him to sell all his and his friends' rights—I paid him forty thousand pounds. I've the receipts in my pocket; it's signed in Chinese and in English. And so the ruby's mine!—mine!—and Rippling Ruby will wear it to-morrow as her mascot. I stand to win half a million of money on Rippling Ruby!"

She suddenly pushed the belt of green leather across the table towards Peggie.

"You'll put that round her neck when she's saddled to-morrow afternoon, Peggie Manson!" she said in her old imperious manner. "Then——"

Miss Hepple rose from her seat—quickly.

"If you leave that thing in this house to-night, Lady Renardsmere, out of this house I go, and my niece with me!" she said quietly. "I wonder that you can ask any decent person to look at it, much less handle it! There's blood!—lives of men!—on it! Peggie!—not a finger near it!"

"I've no intention, Aunt Millie," said Peggie. "I wouldn't touch it for all that Lady Renardsmere gave for it!"

Peyton gave me a kick under the table. I knew what he meant. Put into plain language, there was going to be a row between the three women. And one of them, in our masculine opinion, if not wholly mad, was as mad as a hatter on one point. But—did the other two fully realise it?

I took a furtive glance at Lady Renardsmere. The strange glitter had gone out of her eyes, and she looked, suddenly, her old masterful ordinary self. Once more she pushed the green belt closer to Peggie.

"Rippling Ruby's to carry that when she runs to-morrow!" she said. "You'll put it on her when Medderfield's up."

"No!" said Peggie, determinedly. "I will not!"

Lady Renardsmere began to drum the table with her jewelled fingers. She always wore a lot of rings, but that night she was wearing more than usual, and the diamonds flashed and glittered as her hands moved.

"You're my servant!" she snapped.

"No, I'm not!" retorted Peggie. "I'm your trainer! But I'll be no party to your horse carrying that beastly thing! There—that's flat!"

Again the drumming on the table from the stiff, rigid figure. Suddenly Lady Renardsmere turned to me.

"Cranage!—tell this girl she's a fool!"

"No!" I said firmly. "She isn't!"

"You, too?" she exclaimed. "Then—" she twisted round on Peyton and gave him a steady stare to which he just as steadily responded. "You look like a man of commonsense, you American," she said. "Talk sense to these people!"

Peyton clasped his hands on the table in front of him, and sitting bolt upright, gave Lady Renardsmere a long, calm look.

"Well, if you've no objection, Lady Renardsmere," he said quietly, "I'll talk a little commonsense to you. You're aware, by your own confession, that lives have already been taken by the Chinaman, Chuh Sin, in his efforts to get that thing back. You mentioned three names—there's a fourth to add—your solicitor, Pennithwaite. And—the Chinaman's at hand! He looked through that very window not two hours ago. And if I'm to talk commonsense, it'll be to advise Miss Manson to stick to what she's just said, and have nothing to do with that ruby—it's accursed!"

"I will have nothing to do with it!" said Peggie, firmly. "I'll give up all connection with Lady Renardsmere and her stable first! That's final."

I was scarcely prepared for what followed. But suddenly, and with an agility which would have done credit to a younger woman, Lady Renardsmere jumped to her feet, took two steps to the door, unlocked it, and turning to the electric bell at its

side, pressed the button. Within half-a-minute, Joycey stood before her. She swept her hand round at the rest of us.

"Joycey, turn all these people out of my house!" she said in sharp, firm tones. "Everyone! out they go! Give them ten minutes to pack their things, and then—out!"

"My lady!" said Joycey in his softest tones. "If your ladyship . . ."

"Do as I tell you!" she stormed. "Out!—the whole lot!"

Then, snatching up the green belt from the table, she thrust it into her gown, and walking out into the hall to the two big men, motioned them to follow her into another room. All three disappeared.

We lost no time in obeying Lady Renardsmere's orders. Peggie had her own car and her own chauffeur in the garage at the back of the house, and in less time than had been given us, we had all packed our suit-cases and walked out. Presently we were in the car and out in the street—under the stars.

"Where now?" said Miss Hepple, as the chauffeur turned for orders.

"Tell him to go into London, Jim," answered Peggie. "We'll get in somewhere."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SADDLING Paddock

WE got in—at one of the big hotels in Northumberland Avenue. Late though it was, then, none of us had a mind for immediate retirement; we got together in a corner, a perplexed and forlorn gathering. Peggie was in the lowest depths of despair—and I knew where her thoughts were.

“Of course everything’s over between Lady Renardsmere and me!” she said, suddenly breaking an uncomfortable silence. “If she turns me out of her house, she’ll turn me out of her stables to-morrow morning. It’s all over!”

“My dear, the woman was beside herself to-night,” said Miss Hepple. “She—she might have been drinking, from her behaviour. In the morning——”

“No!” exclaimed Peggie. “I know her! She’ll be no different in the morning. She’s gone clean mad on that notion about the filly carrying that damned ruby! I tell you I know her. She isn’t mad—she’s as cram full of superstition about precious stones as ever a woman could be—always was, ever since I knew her. And she’ll stick that green belt round Rippling Ruby’s neck to-morrow, whatever any-

body says! And as I'll have nothing to do with it and won't countenance it—there's an end. I'm her trainer no longer. I won't give way!—I don't consent to the creature wearing a thing like that, sticky with men's blood. And she won't give way—if Medderfield, for instance, felt like me about it, and refused to ride, she'd bundle him off and get another jockey—anybody, even a stable-lad. She'll make Rippling Ruby carry that beastly thing, and if she does . . .”

“Well?” asked Peyton, after a pause. “What if she does?”

“Then Rippling Ruby won't win the Derby!” answered Peggie in a low voice and with a sombre, moody look in her eyes. “That's a sure thing!”

“Oh, come!” said Peyton. “That's superstition, surely! You're getting as bad as Lady Renardsmere.”

“It isn't superstition,” retorted Peggie. “It's intuition. I feel it!”

“If you've got such a feeling, don't give way to it,” counselled Peyton. “Come!—the filly's an innocent enough animal, anyway. If Lady Renardsmere's so crazed with her superstitions as to insist on Rippling Ruby's carrying that stone—why, that won't interfere with the creature's running powers, I reckon. Not a nice thing to think of, certainly, that she should carry an object that men have been murdered for—but I guess sentiment doesn't come in where horse-racing's concerned. And maybe, as

Miss Hepple suggests, Lady Renardsmere'll have come to her senses in the morning—she's an impulsive old party, seems to me—and we'll get things cleared. I propose we all go to bed and keep cheerful—after all, the main thing is to win that race."

But a bit later, in his own room, into which I had turned for a drink and a cigarette, Peyton shook his head.

"That old woman's clean mad, Cranage!" he said. "No use frightening the girl any more, but I reckon Lady Renardsmere's upset the pan and all the fat's in the fire!"

"How, exactly?" I asked. "I mean as regards the filly?"

"Lady Renardsmere's at Epsom—at least, we left her there," he answered. "And—so is the Chinaman! He'll go for one or both, at one, perhaps, to get at the other. But—he'll act. It's what he's there for."

"The filly's safe as the Bank of England!" said I.

"How do you know that?" said he. "Was—you mean! For anything you know, her crazy owner's been up to that stable by now and taken her away. I tell you, in spite of whatever Miss Manson may say or think about superstition, Lady Renardsmere is mad!—clean off her head. And nobody knows what a madwoman will do next!"

"Sane enough to lug a couple of big brutes about with her as a bodyguard!" I remarked. "I'm not at all sure that she's mad."

"You don't understand," he said. "She may be sane enough on nine points and irredeemably mad on a tenth. The tenth in this case is that ruby. All very well for me to say downstairs that perhaps the old lady'll have come to her senses in the morning—that was to cheer up Miss Manson. My own belief is she won't!—she'll make the filly carry that stone—and the Chinaman's round!"

He began to undress, and for a minute or two I sat smoking and thinking.

"Tell you what!" I said suddenly. "We're close to Scotland Yard, here. I suggest that you and I go round there early to-morrow morning, before we set off to Epsom, and try to see Jifferdene, and if we get him tell him about the Chinaman. He might think it worth while to go down and to take assistance with him."

"Good!" he responded. "Early as you like. But it'll be something like the needle in the bundle of hay!"

"Scarcely," said I. "If, as you say, the Chinaman's fixed on either Lady Renardsmere or her horse, he'd have to get near one or the other to operate. Eh?"

"Neither you nor I know what that extraordinary combination of craft and subtlety will do," he answered oracularly. "However, no harm done in seeing Jifferdene."

He and I went round to Scotland Yard as soon as we had breakfasted next morning. We struck Jif-

ferdene almost at once—and stared at him. He was in immaculate racing get up—a heavy swell, with field-glasses slung over his shoulders and a tall white hat with a black band.

“Needless to ask where you’re going, Jifferdene!” I remarked with a laugh which—to me—sounded very hollow. “It’s proclaimed—all over you!”

“Professional rig-out, Mr. Cranage,” he said. “Duty, sir! There are several of us—not all arrayed in this purple and fine linen, though—going down. You’ll find me in the saddling paddock if you want me. But—what brings you here?”

“Jifferdene,” I said, “the Chinaman’s at Epsom. Listen!”

I told him the story of last night’s apparition and of the subsequent events. He listened attentively, taking it all in.

“And you left Lady Renardsmere down there?” he enquired as I finished.

“At Marengo Lodge,” I answered. “We don’t know, of course, if she stopped there. Probably she did, though one of her big cars was waiting in the courtyard. But we left her—with her bodyguard.”

“I’ll soon settle that,” he remarked, turning to a telephone. “I know now about her Ladyship and her bodyguard, too—got information about her late yesterday afternoon. Lady Renardsmere, gentlemen, attended by two private enquiry agents, expolicemen, has been staying in a suite of rooms at the Great Central Hotel for the past ten days, with

her maid and one man-servant. I'll ring them up and ask if she's still there."

Five minutes later he turned from the telephone.

"Lady Renardsmere went down to Epsom late last night," he said. "She didn't return. So—we'll suppose she's there. Very well!—that simplifies matters."

"How?" asked Peyton.

"Our plan will be—unobtrusively—to keep close to her, and close to her horse," said Jifferdene. "If this Chinaman attempts to interfere with either—eh? You see the point? Now then—just tell me precisely where Marengo Lodge is, and where the filly is stabled, and within an hour from now I and my men'll have both under the closest surveillance—we'll be down there before you are!"

We gave him the fullest particulars, left him, and went back to our hotel. It was then a little before ten o'clock; by a quarter past we were all in Peggie's car and on our way to Epsom. The usual procession from town had already got into full swing; it was a particularly fine morning, and from what we saw as we crossed Westminster Bridge and set out southward, the attendance on the big race promised to be a record one. It seemed to me that we should make slow progress over fourteen miles that lay between us and the Downs, but Peggie's chauffeur, an old Cockney, knew his district, and by a judicious use of sundry short cuts and round-about turns, he got us to the Grand Stand at Epsom

soon after eleven. And leaving him there to park the car amongst the scores that were arriving with every minute all four of us made for the stable, close by, where Rippling Ruby was quartered.

Before we got close to the place, we saw that things had happened. In front, the group of private detectives which Lady Renardsmere had sent down to Manson Lodge, under Robindale, was gathered before Rippling Ruby's special quarters. Between them and us, apparently on the verge of tears, stood Bradgett, talking to Medderfield, the jockey, who, very smart in mufti, appeared to be puzzled beyond expression: behind them, and actually in tears, lurked Rippling Ruby's own particular boy, looking from one to the other as if in hopes of consolation. And a little way off, I saw Jifferdene, in the character of spectator, in the midst of several other men.

Peggie made straight for Bradgett: at sight of her, the stable-boy in the rear let out an unmistakable moan.

"Now, Bradgett, what's going on?" demanded Peggie, with a nod to Medderfield. "Out with it!"

Bradgett shook his head. His clean-shaven face grew long and doleful.

"I don't know what's going on, Miss!" he answered. "Nobody knows what's going on! All I know is that Lady Renardsmere came up here at nine o'clock this morning with a couple of big fellows that stuck uncommon close to her, bundled me

and my men out of the filly's box, locked it up with her own hands, posted those chaps there in front of it, and told me that you weren't her trainer any longer and that it was at our peril we tried to get near Rippling Ruby again! I—I think she must have gone mad, miss, or something—terrible temper she was in, anyway. What are we to do, miss?"

"Where is Lady Renardsmere now?" asked Peggie.

"Can't say, miss," replied Bradgett. "She and the two men went across there—towards Major Camperdale's stables. She's got the key of the filly's box in her pocket, miss."

"What's it all about, Miss Manson?" asked Medderfield naturally inquisitive. "Queer business, isn't it?"

"I can't tell you what it's about, Medderfield," answered Peggie. "Lady Renardsmere——"

The sniffing boy in the rear suddenly broke in——

"Her ladyship's coming back!" he said. "I see her—there's men with her."

We all turned in the direction indicated by the lad's pointing finger. We saw Lady Renardsmere advancing across a corner of the heath just below us. Her two henchmen were at her elbows; behind her walked three men who were obviously stable-boys; at their side strode a tall, soldierly-looking man whom I took to be Major Camperdale, familiar to me by repute as a trainer. And I began to see what was going to happen.

"Come away, Peggie!" I whispered. "No use stopping here! Leave her to do as she likes."

But Peggie remained immovable.

"No!" she said. "Here I am, and here I stick! I'm going to see what happens."

The small procession came on. It had to pass close by us: Lady Renardsmere, marching ahead with a fixed stare on the stables, suddenly looked aside and caught sight of us. Her eyes gleamed with anger and she shook a key at us.

"Go away!" she cried. "Go away, every one of you! I've done with you, Peggie Manson—you're my trainer no longer! I'll have no disobedience from anybody I employ! Go every one of you away!—except you, Medderfield. You come with me—I've some orders for you."

She moved on, and Peyton nudged my elbow.

"Move off!" he said. "Bring the two ladies further back. The old woman's clean off it now! No use exasperating her. Come on!"

I got Miss Hepple and Peggie to retreat. We moved some twenty yards away, Bradgett and the boy following us, and watched. Just what I had anticipated took place. Lady Renardsmere unlocked the box; her attendants went in; within a few minutes they brought Rippling Ruby out; escorted by her crazy owner, her bodyguard of detectives, and her new attendants, she was led away towards Camperdale's place. Peggie's face flushed crimson and then went white; Bradgett swore under his

breath: the boy pulled out a highly-coloured handkerchief and sobbed into it. And Jifferdene, showing no consciousness of knowing us, strolled with his lieutenants after the favourite and her surroundings.

Up to then Medderfield had not moved. But now he looked round—at me. He gave me a flick of his left eyelid and I went up to him.

“Tile gone loose, Mr. Cranage?” he asked, nodding towards Lady Renardsmere.

“Lady Renardsmere and Miss Manson have had a difference, Medderfield,” I said. “Lady Renardsmere is one of those women who won’t be thwarted. But—all that’s no reason why you shouldn’t ride Rippling Ruby this afternoon, is it?”

“Oh, I’m going to ride her, Mr. Cranage!” he said, with decision. “Between you and me, her ladyship’s promised me five thousand pounds if we win. But—hard lines on Miss Manson, sir! The credit’s hers—and I’m damned if I understand this morning’s business, unless, as I say, there’s a tile loose. However, business is business! And so I’ll go and see what her ladyship wants. See you in the saddling paddock later, no doubt.”

He went off in the direction of Camperdale’s stables, and I returned to Peggie and the others. Peggie appeared to have been struck dumb; she stood, very pale and still, watching the disappearance of the little procession around the filly: it was not until it had vanished that she seemed to show

consciousness of anything else. Miss Hepple laid a hand on her arm at last.

"Peggie!" she said. "Would you like to go home?"

Peggie's face suddenly regained its colour and her eyes flashed—dangerously. She turned on Miss Hepple with a defiant face.

"Home!" she exclaimed. "Home? I'll be damned if I would! No!—I'll see it out! After all—I trained her!"

We got her to come away with us; we even got her to eat some lunch. The time passed; we tried to get interested in the vast crowds; in the first two races; it was all no good: all we wanted was . . . but we all knew what that was. And at last we were in the saddling paddock, four units amongst a crowd of men and women anxious to see the favourite. That something strange had happened had already leaked out. I heard whispers, dropped hints. The excitement grew as the time drew near . . .

And at last out she came, and folk pressed near to see her . . . a thing of living fire and life, trained to the last degree of readiness and perfection. And round the beautiful arched neck, securely buckled, was the belt of bright green leather, and the accursed ruby!

CHAPTER XXV

THE CHINAMAN WINS

WE stood together, Miss Hepple, Peggie, Peyton and I—shut out, not by distance but by Lady Renardsmere's temper and caprice, from the beautiful creature in which we were all, and Peggie especially, so deeply interested. She, unconscious of all that concerned her, stood in the centre of a group made up of her new attendants, the watchful body-guard, Lady Renardsmere and Medderfield. Lady Renardsmere, with a jealous hand on the filly's neck, was talking earnestly to the jockey. And all round them and us were onlookers, men and women well known in the racing world, eager and curious to see the favourite, but kept off her by the zealous offices of the men guarding her. Already there was an atmosphere of mystery around Rippling Ruby; rumours had got about, and men were eyeing Lady Renardsmere and Peggie with speculative, inquisitive eyes. An elderly man suddenly turned on Peggie.

"Thought you trained for Lady Renardsmere, Miss Manson?" he said. "Aren't you responsible for that bit of perfection?"

"I was till last night, Captain Marsham,"

answered Peggie, quietly. "Lady Renardsmere has taken her out of my hands."

"Good God!—what a queer thing to do!" exclaimed Captain Marsham. "Never heard of such a thing in my life! Odd!"

"Very!" assented Peggie, laconically.

"Woman's whim, I suppose," continued the old gentleman, with a keen glance. "Eccentric woman, Lady Renardsmere, I believe? Um!—anyway, you'll get the credit—with those who know. You expect her to win easily, I think?"

Peggie looked round the paddock. There were other horses there—Jack Cade, Hedgesparrow, Flotsam, Roneo, and half-a-dozen outsiders. There were knots and groups of people about them, criticising, speculating . . .

"There's nothing here that can beat her," she answered calmly. "There's never been a starter for the Derby that was more likely to win, Captain Marsham. I'd put my last penny on her!"

She turned from him to me and Peyton, drawing Miss Hepple with her.

"Let's get down by the rails, as nearly opposite the winning-post as we can," she said. "I don't want to see any more of this—but I want to see her win. And then—I'm going!"

Peyton took Miss Hepple from her and went ahead. I followed, at Peggie's side. Suddenly as we pushed through the crowd, she slipped her hand in my arm, and whispered.

"Jim!" she said. "I'm done! This finishes it. I shall give up training after this—I'll never train another horse! After all, as old Captain Marsham said, I shall get the credit of Rippling Ruby's success. If—if she wins!"

"You're certain that she'll win, Peggie," I said. "You know you are. So's everybody! Good Lord!—you can't get money on her now except at _____"

"I know—I know!" she answered hurriedly. "But I'm depressed—I've got a queer black feeling as if something was going to happen!"

"Nerves!" I said. "You're upset by last night's and this morning's doings—and no wonder. But _____"

"That beastly thing round her neck!" she interrupted. "Jim!—suppose—suppose the Chinaman's there—and—and he sees the Burma Ruby?"

In the excitement of the moment I had forgotten the Chinaman. I glanced about me, involuntarily, right and left. It was difficult to conceive of any Oriental being able to lurk unobserved amongst that crowd of fashionable men and women.

"I don't see what the Chinaman could do—here," I said. "You saw that Rippling Ruby's being guarded as carefully as ever right up to the last moment. And didn't you notice that Jifferdene and some of his men were close by her and Lady Renardsmere, though of course Lady Renardsmere doesn't know them from any other racegoers? I can't see

how the Chinaman, or any of his accomplices, if he has any can get at either horse or owner."

"I care nothing as to what happens, or might happen, to Lady Renardsmere," she said. "She'd have brought it all on herself by buying that vile thing! But the filly . . ."

"What can happen to her?" I interrupted. "She's so guarded now that a fly couldn't settle on her unobserved. In a few minutes I suppose, she'll be out and going down to the starting-gate. Once Medderfield's in the saddle and on his way : . ."

"I wish it was over, all the same!" she broke in. "I'm anxious, Jim . . . anxious!"

"There's not much anxiety amongst Rippling Ruby's backers, Peggie," I said, trying to cheer her. "Keep your ears open."

And, indeed, judging by the scraps of conversation that one caught on all sides, you quickly picked up two impressions—the first, that everybody looked on the result of the Derby as a foregone conclusion; the second, that, everybody for the last two months had been piling money on Lady Renardsmere's filly. Peyton, steering Peggie into a place close by the rails next to Miss Hepple, turned to me with a significant look.

"Seems like as if everybody around here regards this event as a sort of procession in which Rippling Ruby's to come ahead with all the rest meekly following!" he observed drily. "I've heard six different men say there's only one horse in it, and that

the rest might as well stop in their stables! Say!—I guess Miss Manson's taking it badly?"

"Very!" said I. "I wish it was all over."

"Well," he remarked. "I see no danger now. There's nothing to do but bring her out and let her run. Now what's the etiquette of this historic event? Supposing Rippling Ruby wins?—is it the proper thing for her owner to go out on the track there and lead her in?"

"It is!" said I. "A very proud moment—for the owner."

"Will Lady Renardsmere do that?" he asked.

"If I know anything about her, Lady Renardsmere assuredly will," I answered. "Nobody more readily—mad or sane!"

He gave me a look and drew me a little aside.

"That'll be the dangerous moment!" he said. "I reckon there'll be a crush all round horse and owner. Then will come the Chinaman's opportunity!"

"You think he's about, Peyton?" I said, glancing around.

"Sure!" he asserted firmly. "On the spot—somewhere. And if he sees that ruby—there'll be developments. He'll go for it—somehow!"

"He can do what he likes—when the race is over," I said. "But—I don't see how he can get at anything or anybody before."

"It'll be when I say," declared Peyton. "And—I see no need to warn Lady Renardsmere. But—hallo, the horses are coming out!"

The horses came out in the order of the card—I took no particular notice of any of them except of Jack Cade, a great, raking brown colt, and of Hedgesparrow, a somewhat lightly built, graceful chestnut filly. Nor did anyone else—everybody's eyes and attentions were for Rippling Ruby, who merged into full view halfway down the lot, to be greeted with a roar from the crowd on the opposite side of the course.

She looked as well-behaved as she was well-bred, and murmurs of admiration sounded on all sides of us. But a sharp-eyed man close by me suddenly spoke—loudly.

“What's that strip of bright green the filly's got round her neck, and the shining thing set in it?” he exclaimed. “What damned nonsense is that?”

Another man half turned and looked at the speaker, quietly and significantly.

“Mascot!” he said laconically. “Have you never heard of old Lady Renardsmere's superstitious passion for precious stones? That's her way, evidently, of ensuring good luck!”

“More likely to ensure bad luck!” declared the other peevishly. “Decking out a horse as fools do a motor-car! Mascot be damned—ridiculous! Never saw an English race-horse with such a thing on in *my* time!—pretty long time too, now, begad!”

“Don't suppose it'll make any difference, one way or another,” said the second speaker, laconically.

"She's about as dead sure to win as she can be—they're wanting seven to two on, now."

The parade went through and one by one the horses got down to the starting-gate. We could see the jockeys' caps moving about like bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. Peyton, a head taller than myself, turned to me with a question.

"How'll we identify our little lady as she comes round and along?" he asked. "Even through these glasses, it's a bit difficult to make out which is which."

"Look for a bright green cap," I said. "Lady Renardsmere's colours are bright green cap and jacket, with a band of orange from the right shoulder to the left hip. Look for the cap! There's no other light coloured cap that I can see. Keep your eye——"

"They're off!"

The sudden mighty roar from the crowd made Peyton jump, and I saw his cheeks flush with eagerness and excitement. Towering above the rest of us he could see more than we could, and following the bobbing caps as the horses swept forward over the high ground at the far side of the course, he began to murmur information.

"I can see the light cap—it's right in the middle of 'em! There's a dark cap in front—well in front. Who's that?" he asked.

"Hanged if I know!" said I. "Never mind what's in front now!—it's what'll be in front when they

get here. Watch 'em as they begin to come round!"

Than I looked at Peggie. Close to the rails, and almost opposite the winning-post, she was staring straight in front of her—at nothing. And I edged closer to her and put my hand through her arm, careless of how the horses were running. Another couple of minutes . . .

"Can't see 'em now, much," muttered Peyton, in my rear. "They've sort of dropped down. The light cap was about the same . . ."

A sudden vast roar on our left burst out as the close-packed mass swept round Tattenham Corner and came into full view of the eager multitude on the stand side of the course—a roar that began and continued, gathering volume. And for a second I forgot Peggie and her white face and burning eyes.

"Look now, Peyton!" I cried. "Look closely!"

"They're mixed up!" he answered. "Close packed—now—yes, by Gad, I see the light cap coming out!—coming out!—she's in front!"

The great crowd saw too, and the roar deepened and spread. A big man, taller than Peyton, suddenly took his field-glasses from his eyes, and laughed.

"She's lengths ahead now, by Gad!" he said with a snap of his lips. "Lengths! And they aren't the distance! She'll win in a common canter!"

The roaring of the crowd began to be mingled with laughter—the laughter that comes from folk

who see happening exactly what they want to happen. It was like one great Homeric shout, from the big packed stands, the paddocks and rings, the seething multitudes on either side the course. I stretched myself to full height and looked. Rippling Ruby at the distance was, so far as I could judge, six lengths in front of Jack Cade, and still coming along like a meteor. All over but the shouting!—and the shouting had begun and was increasing in volume with every stride the filly took.

“Peggie!” I said. “Peggie! . . . she’s done it . . .”

It was in that very second—it must have been as I spoke that last triumphant word—that the infernal thing happened. Rippling Ruby was then some thirty or forty yards from the winning-post, lengths in front of Jack Cade, who, however, was coming on in great style in her rear, though far too late to overhaul her; just behind him was Hedgesparrow, with Flotsam and a couple of outsiders at her heels; the rest of the field was tailing off.

How the thing was done no witness or bystander was ever able to tell clearly—but suddenly from out the close-packed crowd on the lower side of the course an object which, said such as saw it, looked like a cricket-ball, was flung in front of the filly. There was a blinding flash, a deepening roar . . . and Rippling Ruby went down as if shot through the heart, quivered, lay still, while Medderfield, thrown headlong, staggered on to his knees and then

collapsed in a motionless heap. And over Rippling Ruby fell Jack Cade, and over him Hedgesparrow, and Flotsam, steered wide of the struggling mass, went on and passed the post . . .

The next thing that I knew was that Peyton and I, fighting like tigers, were in the middle of a howling and shouting mob, forcing our way to the filly's side. The crowds from either side had surged on to the course—we were mixed up with them and with the police—for some minutes the whole thing was hell. I saw men that I recognised, also fighting like demons to get near or to restore order; Jifferdene — Camperdale — Bradgett — detectives — stable-boys. And all round us some men were cursing, and some were speechless with rage, and some were holding blood-stained handkerchiefs to their cheeks, and here and there a man lay dead, and in the clearer spaces some were running blindly about with stretched fingers, as if to clutch the miscreant . . .

We fought our way to the filly at last. She was dead as a stone, and the bright green belt and the gold-set ruby had vanished. And Peyton laid a sore-shaking hand on my arm.

"The Chinaman's won, Cranage!" he whispered. "Now . . . the girl! Go back to her!"

I went back, still fighting my way yard by yard, to Peggie. She had heard by then, and without a word to her, I took her arm and led her away, out of the paddock, across the course, and, in silence, across a quiet stretch of the down-land beyond.

There was a lane, shaded, unfrequented, opening off that, and we turned into it, and I put my arm round her. She burst into welcome tears at the touch of my hand . . . and it was in the midst of these tears that we kissed each other for the first time.

THE END

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The Charing Cross Mystery

By J. S. Fletcher

"The Charing Cross Mystery" possesses all the excellent qualities which have made the author the outstanding writer of today in the field of mystery stories. Unlike most of his contemporaries who attempt to write novels of the same type, Mr. Fletcher goes beyond mere skill in plot-making and creates living characters in whose adventures the reader can actually believe. His stories are unfailingly interesting; one thrilling incident follows another in rapid succession, but logically and satisfactorily. The *Boston Evening Transcript* says, "Mr. Fletcher is a master of plot, and he never goes beyond the bounds of reason in its procedure and development. He, moreover, can write the English language as a vital means to the end both of narrative and description, and he never fails to show that he is its master. It is therefore a pleasure to read his stories, not merely for their entertaining qualities, but also for the agreeable appeal of their manner and their style."

Fighting Blood

By

H. C. Witwer

If Gale Galen had stopped to remember that he was only a soda clerk he would probably have been running yet, but instead he laid down his bar-rag and knocked out the second best welterweight in the game. The welter had been passing out a few unpleasant remarks. If Gale had been an ordinary sort he would have stuck to the ring after he had proved he could fight—instead of heading up the road labeled *Education*. He was a mighty fine boy, there's no doubt of that; but if it had not been for Judy Wilcox it *is* doubtful if he would have done any of the really fine things which set him apart from the ordinary run of fighters. *Fighting Blood* is a wonderful story—as true to romance as it is to the ring. The author knows fighters backwards and forward. When they fight, they fight; they don't do gymnastics with boxing gloves. You get the glare of the big white light, the dripping bodies and labored breathing, stale smoke, a thud on the jaw—and then on the canvas. *It's Witwer.*

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